

Disclaimer:

Bob and I don't own Harry Pott...Wait a minute. That's not right!

Alyx stared at her keyboard in bewilderment for a moment. Had she been about to write a Standard Disclaimer? Her mind shied away from the thought.

Taking a deep breath, she cracked her knuckles, then wiggled her fingers over the keyboard, chanting "Ooga chaka!" quietly under her breath, then began to type.

A tap on her shoulder a few moments later caused her to scream and spin around in her chair.

"What are you doing?" a raspy, choking voice asked menacingly.

"For the love of little green llamas, don't do that, Bob! And what's wrong with your voice?" she asked, scowling at her husband.

Bob coughed to clear his throat, then shrugged. "Sorry, I just woke up. So, what are you doing?"

"I'm writing a disclaimer for that story I finally finished," she told him proudly.

"Oh? And what are you disclaiming this time?"

"Well, it seems that the good folks who read fan fiction are a bit on the stupid side. Otherwise, we wouldn't have to keep remind them that we don't own...Harry...Pott... Um, Bob? What are you wearing?"

Bob looked down at himself and his expression quickly changed to shock as a flush spread over his cheeks. "What is this?" he whispered, running his hands over his chest, pulling at the cloth he wore.

"It looks like a bustier," Alyx said, trying to stifle a snicker. "My bustier, to be precise. Have you been rooting through my lingerie?"

"No! I don't understand what...Wait a minute. Are those my boxers you're wearing?"

She glanced down at herself and blinked. "Why, yes. Yes they are." Looking up, she stared at him for a moment. "I think I get it."

"What? Get what? What are you getting? And how the hell can you wear these things?" He shouted as he began to dance around, trying to pick the thong of her pink panties out of his butt.

Sighing, she spun him back around and smiled. "Now you're beginning to understand my part in these disclaimers, dear. Next time, though, I think I'll put you in 6 inch stilettos and nothing else."

"Oh, God, make it stop!" he cried, grabbing her by the arms.

Turning him slowly around to face the readers, she stood on her toes and whispered seductively in his ear. "Tell them, love. Tell them what they must know before reading the story. Then I'll teach you all about the proper way to remove a thong."

Nodding vigorously, he stared at the readers in near panic. "WE DON'T OWN HARRY POTTER!" he shrieked.

"Nicely done, honey. Now, come along," Alyx told her gibbering husband as she lead him from the room. In the doorway, she stopped and faced the readers once more. "Enjoy the story, everyone. Oh, and Dazza? Yes, this is really us. And if you don't believe me, you'll be the next one to prance around in one of my thongs in a disclaimer – only it will be made of rusty barbed wire!"

Number Four, Privet Drive, the first few weeks of summer...

Everyone assumed the summer after fifth year would be the same for Harry Potter as every other summer. They might have been right, had things not gone so horribly wrong at the Department of Mysteries.

Had Sirius lived, Dumbledore's revelation of the prophecy might not have garnered the reaction it did from the young man. Had the old man bothered to check on the Occlumency lessons Snape had been giving him, Harry might have been able to block the images Voldemort was sending him.

In the end, Harry had been sent back to the Dursley household and told to contact the Order every three days so they would know he

was being treated well. What the Order wasn't aware of, since no one bothered to check, was that Vernon dictated what Harry wrote, so as to make sure to keep the "freaks" out of his house. The threats made at the train station had only increased the man's hatred of his nephew and Harry's treatment at the hands of his family was worse than it had ever been.

The first month of summer had been almost dreamlike for Harry. He was fed regularly, but otherwise left alone, except on letter days. On those days, Vernon stayed in Harry's room only long enough to dictate and read over the letter being sent to the Order, then left once it was sent off. The time alone allowed Harry to grieve for his Godfather in private. As the weeks passed, the pain eased, but he knew he would carry the guilt and regret for the disaster at the Department of Mysteries for the rest of his life.

At the start of July, his aunt and uncle began to "forget" to feed him. On letter days, meals were brought to him and he started to hide some of what was on his plate for those days when food was not forthcoming. It wasn't much of a hardship, as he'd become accustomed to meager rations during the summer holidays. The one time he mentioned to his uncle that the Order would not be pleased to know he was being forgotten at mealtimes, he'd earned a punch to the gut and a long lecture about "those sodding freaks" and how they'd never learn, or Harry would pay the price for their knowledge of it.

The next day, Harry discovered that he was to pay a price for his comment anyway. Returning from the bathroom that morning, his door was closed and locked. It remained that way until six in the evening, when his uncle let him out to use the facilities. When he was finished, he was locked in for the night.

Ten hours or more without the use of a bathroom became a serious problem. Harry was able to solve it, for the most part, by using the waste bin in his room. His aunt and uncle were not pleased with his solution, but when he pointed out that they could solve the problem by letting him out more often, he was shoved back into his room and told to keep his mouth shut.

That night, Harry's anger got the better of him and he was unable to sleep. After relieving himself in the waste bin around three in the morning, he scowled down at it for a moment before bending down

to pick it up. If his aunt and uncle didn't like him carting the thing to the bathroom, he'd take care of that problem!

Marching to the window, open to catch any hint of a breeze, he popped the screen out carefully and dumped the contents of the bin into the flower bed below. Hedwig, locked in her cage by Vernon, clicked her beak disapprovingly.

"They don't want me carrying it to the bathroom, girl. Never say I don't mind my aunt and uncle," he told her, grinning.

Hedwig blinked at him before turning away and ruffling her feathers.

Shrugging, Harry put the bin down and replaced the screen. Flopping down on his bed, he smiled up at the ceiling and eventually drifted off.

When morning came, Harry took the bin into the bathroom to rinse it out. Aunt Petunia watched, her nose crinkled in disgust, but said nothing. When he was finished, he was locked in his room once more.

He continued to dump his waste bin into the flower garden each night and took great pleasure in watching the plants below die. The heat, however, worked against him. The scent of stale urine began to waft up to his window, and within a week, the neighbors were complaining of the horrible smell. As Petunia watched Harry carry the bin into the bathroom each morning, she could not understand where the smell was coming from, and eventually dumped the problem into her husband's lap.

Vernon, sure the boy was the cause, decided to "beat some decency" into the young man. When he left Harry's room that night, he took the waste bin with him.

Groaning in pain, Harry roused himself a few hours later and, in a perverse mood, dragged a chair over to the window. After popping out the screen, he stood on the chair and relieved himself out into the night, not caring if anyone saw.

That night, Tonks got the shock of her life. The smell around Privet Drive had now been explained, though in much more detail than she wanted.

She returned to Headquarters almost immediately and roused Remus. Telling him what she saw, he could only shake his head in confusion. When she insisted that he do something, he promised her that he would contact Dumbledore in the morning.

The Dursley Residence, the next day...

The sound of the locks on his bedroom door being opened woke Harry, and he sat up, wincing in pain. He stood up and moved toward the door, but froze when it opened to reveal the Headmaster.

"What do you want?" Harry asked coldly.

Dumbledore examined the young man carefully, noting the bruising around his ribs and upper arms. "I've come to check on you, Harry."

"Bit late for that, isn't it? Why the sudden concern?"

"Miss Tonks saw you last night," Dumbledore told him, waving a hand at the window. "And while it certainly explains the smell, questions have been raised."

"Such as?"

"Such as why you felt the need to relieve yourself in such a way."

Harry glanced at his nervous aunt and snorted. "I'm only allowed out of my room twice a day to use the loo. And before you ask, no, I don't know why. For that answer, you'll have to ask my ever-loving aunt."

Before Dumbledore could ask anything else, Harry pushed past him, saying, "Now, if you'll excuse me, you're cutting into the time I've been given to use the bathroom and today is a shower day. She'll have Dudley drag me out, whether I'm finished or not."

The bathroom door slammed closed a few moments later and the sound of running water began.

Shaking his head, Dumbledore turned away from the bathroom door and looked at Petunia for nearly a full minute. The woman squirmed, but said nothing.

"Well?" the Headmaster finally asked, his patience wearing thin.

Straightening her shoulders, Petunia faced Dumbledore and scowled. "You've dumped the boy here and demanded we care for him. What more do you want?"

"And this is what you call caring for him?" Dumbledore asked in disbelief. "Allowed to leave his room twice a day to relieve himself? Bruises and hand prints all over his body? He's skin and bone, Petunia! Are you even feeding him? For Merlin's sake, he's your nephew!"

"He is my dead sister's child and a freak," she screeched at him. "I didn't ask that he come here to live. He was forced on us, by you. Never mind the danger you've put my family in by bringing the little menace here!"

"He is your family!" Dumbledore told her, his eyes snapping angrily.

"No, he isn't! He never was! I wish the little bastard had never been born. He's nothing but a burden to -"

"Enough!" Albus bellowed. "Listen to me, woman, and listen well -"

"Don't bother," a quiet voice cut in.

Petunia and Dumbledore both whirled around to see Harry standing in the bathroom doorway with a towel wrapped around his hips and his dirty clothes under one arm. He'd learned to shower quickly, as his cousin took great pleasure in dragging him of the bathroom, clothed or not.

"You'll never get through to her, you know," he said, his green eyes boring into the Headmaster's. "And even if you did, by some miracle, there's still my uncle and you'll never convince him."

"Harry," Dumbledore began as he took a step forward.

Holding up a hand, Harry shook his head. "No, I think that's enough. After all, didn't you tell me at the end of term that you knew you were condemning me to ten dark and difficult years? What you seem to have missed, Headmaster, is that every summer I come back here

is a continuation of those years. My time at Hogwarts is a nice break from the oh, so loving embrace of my relatives, even with having to fight Voldemort or dealing with Snape -"

"Professor Snape," Dumbledore corrected automatically.

"Shut up and listen!" Harry hissed furiously. "Snape is a foul, loathsome man and you're the only one who trusts him. His Occlumency lessons left me more open to Voldemort's attacks, not less! He's bigoted, unfair and the worst teacher I've ever had. Sirius is dead because of him, and your trust in him!"

"Now Harry, that's not -"

Walking past the Headmaster, Harry could only shake his head. "Oh, go away, you old fool." Reaching his room, he tossed his dirty clothes on the floor and turned to face Petunia. "As this isn't a letter day, I'm sure I won't be getting breakfast. You might as well close the door and lock it. I'm finished speaking to the Professor and I wouldn't want to keep you from your busy life, Aunt."

Throwing himself down on the bed, he turned to face the wall and didn't relax until he heard the door close behind him. It wasn't locked.

Finishing dinner that night in his room, Harry thought that Dumbledore's visit had accomplished one thing. He was being fed again, but he wasn't counting on it lasting. Wrapping some food in his napkin, he put his plate outside his door.

Moving to Hedwig's cage, he checked her water and shared some of his dinner scraps with her. As Vernon had locked her in her cage, she was only able to hunt when she delivered his letters to the Order. He stroked her feathers through the bars of the cage, then moved to the window to gaze out at the coming twilight, wishing he, too, could fly free.

Turning away from the window, he heard his uncle bellow from downstairs and scowled. The words weren't clear enough to understand, but it was obvious he was angry about something. Hiding the remains of his dinner in his trunk, he waited.

The yelling continued for a few minutes, then pounding footsteps on the stairs told him he was about to find out what was going on, whether he wanted to or not.

When the door was pushed open, Harry blinked in surprise.

"Hey, Harry!"

"Tonks? What are you doing here?"

"Seeing as how you've been using the flower beds for a loo, Professor Dumbledore felt we should take you on to Headquarters," she told him, her eyes dancing merrily.

"Did he?" he asked as he sat down on the bed and folded his arms across his chest. "To be kept a prisoner there, like Sirius was? Thank you, but I'll pass."

"What do you mean? Surely you can't want to stay here," she exclaimed.

He shrugged. "Better the devil you know...or however that saying goes."

"But we've all come to get you. Please, Harry, don't be difficult," she pleaded.

"I didn't ask you to," he told her simply.

"Tonks, what's taking you so long?" the voice of Remus Lupin called from the stairs.

"Harry doesn't want to come," she called back.

"What?" several voices bellowed.

More footfalls were heard on the stairs and Harry lay back on his bed, his head cushioned on his arms. He stared up at the ceiling and tried very hard not to smile.

"Harry," Remus began as he walked into the room, "what's this about?"

"Your friends have come to take you away for the rest of the summer, boy. Pack your things and go, now," Vernon demanded.

"Are you kicking me out, Uncle?" Harry asked. "Can I no longer call this house my home?"

Vernon shifted uncomfortably when Remus and Tonks glared at him. "I didn't say that," he began.

"Then I'll stay, thank you," Harry said politely.

"Harry," Remus tried again.

"It's no use, Remus. I'm not going. But I thank you for coming."

"What's taking so long?" yelled Mad-Eye Moody. "We've got a schedule to keep!"

Tonks looked questioningly at Remus, who shrugged.

"Let's leave it for now," he murmured.

"If you change your mind, Harry," Tonks began, staring at the boy on the bed.

"I'm sure my Uncle will allow me to add that to the letters he dictates for the Order," Harry quipped, watching Vernon turn a lovely shade of puce.

"Here, now, what's this?" the witch asked as Remus pushed her from the room.

When the door closed behind them, Harry closed his eyes.

So, Dumbledore thinks he can order my life for me? he thought. Listening to him has brought me nothing but pain and grief. The time has come for me to do things my way.

Two hours later, the door to his room was pushed open once more. Opening his eyes, Harry almost smiled. He'd wondered how long it would take before the Order members scurried back to Dumbledore.

"Hello, Harry," the Headmaster said as he entered the room.
"Remus tells me we have a bit of a problem on our hands."

"There is no problem, Professor. I don't want to go to Headquarters," Harry told him simply.

"You would rather stay here with your aunt and uncle?"

"One prison is as good as another," the boy said, shrugging.
"Besides, with the blood wards, this is the safest place for me, or so you keep saying."

"True, but I think Headquarters would be a better place for you now. You've been here long enough to fulfill the requirements of the wards. Besides, once at Headquarters, you'll be able to see your friends."

When Harry said nothing, Albus sighed and looked around the room. Spotting Hedwig, he moved to her cage and released the small padlock Vernon had placed on the door. Opening the cage, he waved his wand at the window, removing the screen and the Snowy Owl took flight. As she flew from the room, Harry glared at her.

"Traitor," he murmured softly, thought not really angry.

With a few flicks of his wand, Dumbledore had Harry's room packed, then turned back to the boy on the bed. "Shall we go?"

When Harry remained silent, the Headmaster took a pencil from the desk in the corner and made a portkey. The boy watched him very closely.

"This will take you to Headquarters," he said, holding it out.

Harry didn't move.

Eyes twinkling, Dumbledore moved to place the portkey in Harry's hand.

Understanding the old man's intent, Harry, in what he knew to be a rather childish action, removed his hands from behind his head and slid them under his body.

With a chuckle, Dumbledore placed the portkey on Harry's chest and tapped it with his wand. Harry's rather indignant squawk echoed through the room just before he disappeared.

When Harry arrived at Grimmauld, he set off Mrs Black. Stumbling on landing, he bumped into the wall and, cursing, slid down it to the floor, causing the drapes around the portrait to spring open and the shrieking to begin.

Footsteps pounded down the hallway and from somewhere overhead. Remus Lupin, with Moody on his heels, arrived a few moments before Tonks, who all but tripped down the last flight of stairs.

"Shut up, you old windbag," Tonks bellowed as she wrestled the drapes closed.

"Glad to see you, Harry," Remus said as he offered the young man a hand up.

Before Harry could react, his belongings suddenly appeared in the hall, pelting both Moody and Remus. Amide the cursing from Mad-Eye, the exclamations from Remus and the laughter from Tonks, Mrs Black's lovely shrieking began once more.

Harry laughed as he watched the adults scramble around him. Remus and Moody sorted his belongings, while Tonks once again wrestled with Mrs Black.

Pushing himself to his feet, he brushed past Tonks and went upstairs to the room he and Ron had shared. Once there, he slammed the door closed and grinned as the portrait started up again.

Several minutes later, the three adults looked at one another and Moody motioned them to follow him. Once in the kitchen, Tonks made tea and they all sat down at the table.

"Well, that didn't go over very well," Remus muttered as he ran a hand through his hair.

"I told you Dumbledore was making a mistake in forcing Potter to come here," Moody growled.

"It's not like we could leave him with those relatives of his, Mad-Eye," Tonks grouched. "They weren't feeding him, and he was locked in his room, unable to use the bathroom regularly!"

"So, he trades one prison for another," Alastor said with a careless shrug.

"This isn't a prison," Tonks protested, glaring at the old man. "Besides, here he'll be fed and be able to move about as he likes."

"So he'll be able to leave the house? Take a trip to Diagon Alley?" Moody asked as he pushed away the tea cup and reached for his flask.

"Of course not," Remus said tiredly. "It's too dangerous for him to leave Headquarters. You know that, Alastor."

"Funny," Moody said as he pushed away from the table and stood up. "That's the same reasoning that was used with Sirius. You might want to remember how that turned out." Turning on his heel, he left the kitchen.

Remus paled and looked at Tonks. "Are we making a mistake? Could Dumbledore be wrong?"

"Would you rather leave him with his relatives to be starved or beaten?" she asked. "Dumbledore knows what he's about." She stood up and stretched. "I've got to get back to the Ministry. Don't worry, Remi. Things will work out and Harry will be fine."

She squeezed his shoulder as she passed him, then left the kitchen.

"That's what we all thought about Sirius," Remus murmured.

The knock on Harry's door came several hours later. Bored, he rolled over on his bed. "Yeah, come in," he called.

Remus entered, levitating Harry's trunk and Hedwig's cage behind him. "I thought you might want these," he told the young man. "Hedwig should be back by morning and I'm sure she'll want her cage."

Harry shrugged. "Maybe. Uncle Vernon had her locked in the cage while I stayed there so I couldn't contact the Order. She may not want any part of it now."

"Let's wait and see, shall we?" Lupin asked. Putting the trunk at the end of Harry's bed, he then placed Hedwig's cage on a small table in the corner and opened the window so she could enter when she returned.

Done with the domestic chores, he turned to face Harry and cocked his head slightly. "So, why did you want to stay with your relatives?"

"Like I told Tonks, better the devil you know."

"We would never hurt you, Harry," Remus told him earnestly.

"Maybe not purposely. But look at my history, Remus. I've been hurt more by the good intentions of those who are supposed to be on my side than I have by any five Death Eaters," he said, rolling his eyes. "At least with the Death Eaters, I know they're trying to kill me."

"Don't you think that's a bit of an exaggeration?" Remus asked.

"No, not at all." Scrambling off the bed, Harry went to his trunk and opened it. "I got bored and finished most of my summer assignments. Hermione's going to be shocked, I can tell you. Anyway, I didn't have anything else to do, so I wrote down everything I've been through since I started Hogwarts." He pulled out a small notebook and passed it to the werewolf. "It starts with my first year. Read it, then come back and tell me I'm exaggerating."

Taking the offered notebook, Remus looked into the young man's vibrant green eyes and nodded. "I'll get this back to you."

Harry shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I lived through it. I'm stuck with the memories of those events. A lost notebook won't change that," he said bitterly.

"Is there anything you need?" Remus asked as he slipped the notebook into the pocket of his robe.

"To leave," Harry told him. "I don't want to be here any more than Sirius did."

Pain and sorrow shone from the older man's gray eyes. "I'm sorry, Harry. The Headmaster wants you here, for your protection."

"That's what the blood wards at the Dursleys are for," Harry muttered.

"Harry," Remus pleaded.

"Yeah, fine, whatever. You're one of Dumbledore's loyal lackeys. Understood." Rearranging the contents of his trunk, he listened as Remus opened the bedroom door. "Oh, and Remus? I'm pretty sure Sirius would be very disappointed in you for this. He hated this house and wouldn't want me locked up here. You know that."

The door closed softly behind him and Harry kicked his trunk in frustration. Taking out the cloth napkin he'd hidden in his trunk earlier, he closed the lid and sat down on the bed to eat. Hedwig would be able to hunt for herself now, so there was no need to share.

Once he'd finished eating, he stretched out on his bed and stared up at the ceiling. He wasn't sure what time it was, but it felt late. Yawning, he rolled over and eventually drifted off.

The next morning, his stomach growling with hunger, Harry dressed quickly and made his way down to the kitchen. The room was empty, but it was obvious several people had been there. Tea cups were scattered all over the large table and dirty dishes were piled high in the sink. The stove was covered in dirty pots and pans that looked as though they hadn't been washed in several days.

Wrinkling his nose in disgust, Harry opened the refrigerator, then slammed it shut quickly. He wasn't sure what was in there, but whatever it was, was growing, and he could have sworn it blinked at him.

The Order members were slobs and it appeared as though Mrs Weasley hadn't been around in awhile. Harry knew she would never put up with such a mess.

He stood for a moment, his brow wrinkled in thought. He couldn't use magic, and didn't know what charms Mrs Weasley used to clean

dishes anyway. It was obvious there was no food in the house, but tea would be nice. But with no clean cups, there was little choice.

Rolling up his sleeves, he opened the cupboard below the sink. Somewhat surprised, he found a bottle of muggle soap and a small, green scrubbing pad. Setting them on the table, he began to move the dirty dishes out of the sink and stack them on the table so he'd have room. Once the sink was empty of dishes, he cleaned it thoroughly, then filled one side with hot, soapy water.

Finding the cleanest dishtowels he could, he placed them on the counter next to the sink and began doing dishes.

Twenty minutes later, the kitchen door swung open and Remus entered the room.

Glancing behind him, Harry scowled. "You know, you people are pigs."

"What are you doing?" Remus asked.

"Looks like the same thing I did at my relatives house before the Order had words with my uncle. Haven't you people ever heard of clean dishes?"

"Move out of the way, Harry. I'll do those," Remus said, pulling out his wand.

"You're a little late," he said, holding up the last cup. "I've finished with this lot. I'll leave the pots and pans to you, though. It would take me a week to get them clean this way. I'm surprised no one's gotten sick from this filth."

Finished with the cup, he pulled the plug and watched the third sink full of dirty water drain away. "Oh, and you might want to think about throwing away the refrigerator. Something is growing in there and I don't think it has plans of moving out anytime soon."

Drying his hands, he moved to the table and sat down. He watched curiously as Remus cleaned the pots, pans and the top of the stove. The man's face was flushed with embarrassment and Harry could only shake his head.

When he'd finished, Remus faced him and tried to smile. "How about a cup of tea?"

"Tea would be nice. Breakfast would be better. Interestingly enough, you have neither in the house. Funny, but I could have stayed with my aunt and uncle and been treated better than this. True, they didn't feed me either, but this summer I didn't have to do dishes."

Raking a hand through his hair in frustration, Remus glared at him. "Enough, already. I get the point, Harry. You don't want to be here. However, I am not responsible for bringing you here and treating me as though I'm the enemy is unfair."

"Unfair?" Harry asked in astonishment. "If you read anything in my notebook last night, how dare you speak to me of fairness!" Shoving away from the table, he stood up and scowled at the older man. "How is being here any better than being at the Dursleys? Sure, I don't have to piss out the window, but everything else is the same." He knew he was grossly overstating the case, but didn't care much. "I still have to clean up after slob, I've had nothing to eat and I'm still a prisoner! Tell me, Remus, when do the beatings begin?"

Lupin's fists clenched at his sides. Staring at the angry teenager for a moment, he took a deep, calming breath. "Mrs Weasley will be by later today to restock the kitchen with food."

"Are you unable to go to the store yourself? What's the matter, Moony? Did Dumbledore tighten your leash?" Harry asked scathingly.

Remus took one gliding, menacing step toward him, then froze when he saw satisfaction light the young man's face. "I'll go to the store and pick up a few things to hold us over until Mrs Weasley arrives," he said quietly.

Shrugging, Harry sat back down. "I'll wait."

Several minutes after Remus left the kitchen, Harry climbed the stairs and listened. Hearing nothing, he turned down the hallway and entered the library. There, just as he remembered, were the heavily laden bookshelves.

Quickly scanning the titles, he skipped over the darker texts, unsure if they were being monitored. He did take the books on Occlumency, several on shielding, and two interesting tomes on dueling dark wizards.

Leaving the library with his stolen bounty, he raced up the stairs. Entering his room, he moved quickly to his bed. Dropping the books on the floor, he lifted the mattress with one hand and used the other to stuff the books beneath it, one at a time.

When he was finished, he straightened the blanket and stood back to examine his work. With a nod, he turned on his heel and returned as quickly as he could to the kitchen.

Seated once again in the chair he'd left only minutes before, he grinned to himself. If Remus was that easily riled, he wouldn't be much of a guard. Not that Harry minded, of course. It fit in perfectly with his plans.

Later...

Pushing his plate away and leaning back on his chair, Harry smiled at Remus. "I'll say this much. You may be a slow starter, but you sure know how to finish properly! Thanks for breakfast. It was great."

Remus took the dishes to the sink and set them to cleaning before refilling his cup with tea and sitting down across from the young man. "I'm sorry, Harry. I honestly didn't expect Dumbledore to bring you here last night. I thought Molly would have time to restock the pantry before you arrived."

"What about you and Moody? Don't you two eat?" Harry asked curiously.

Remus shrugged. "Alastor doesn't live here and rarely stays for meals unless Molly's cooking. I cook for myself, but when supplies run low, I usually settle for take away."

"Wouldn't it be easier to just go shopping?"

The older man grimaced. "Probably, but I hate doing it. Look, Harry, if you don't mind, I'd like to talk to you about the information you

gave me last night." He reached into the pocket of his robe, pulled out Harry's notebook and slid it across the table to the teen.

Harry shrugged, took the notebook and shoved it into his pocket. "Sure. I figured you might."

Leaning forward, Remus crossed his arms on the table. "The information is pretty self explanatory and you gave a great deal of detail," he began.

Harry grinned. "Yes, Professor. Five years at Hogwarts will teach one to be thorough when doing assignments. Are you going to grade me, Moony?"

With a wry grin, Remus shook his head. "Sorry. That did sound a bit professor-ish, didn't it? Now, for the moment, I only have one question and I can't get past it."

"Oh?"

"Did you ever tell Sirius about the Dursleys?"

Harry's eyes darkened. "No," he said, flatly.

"Why? Harry, he would have been outraged over what they were doing to you. He knew you didn't like it there, but he thought it was only because you weren't allowed to go out much and couldn't visit with your friends. He wasn't happy about that, but he understood the reasons behind it. Had he known what they were doing to you, the physical stuff, he would have done everything he could to prevent it."

Harry closed his eyes and his hands, resting on the table, fisted tightly. "Sirius was dealing with his own problems. Had he know what was happening, he would have charged in. We both know that would have caused more problems for him and I didn't want to be the reason for it. Besides," he added, opening his eyes and looking down at his hands, "I was embarrassed. I'm a wizard, but couldn't defend myself against a bunch of muggles."

"That's the Ministry's fault, Harry, not yours. Their restriction on underage magic prevented you from defending yourself in that way."

He fiddled with his teacup for moment, before looking at him again. "Why didn't you tell Dumbledore?"

"I did," Harry said quietly. "He knew, but said I still had to go back. After Sirius died, Dumbledore told me that he'd always known what life would be like for me at the Dursleys, but felt it was still the safest place, regardless of what I had to go through while staying there."

"I find that hard to believe," Remus breathed.

Harry shrugged again. "Most people would. Look, you can ask Fred, George or Ron. In second year, they pulled the bars off my bedroom window so I could leave the house. Ron and Hermione know the Dursleys don't feed me much over the summer. They send me food sometimes, and Mrs. Weasley usually sends me something to eat for my birthday. I managed. At least when I was in the cupboard under the stairs, I could sneak into the kitchen at night and get something to eat. But when they put the locks on the door of my bedroom, that changed."

"Did they starve you?"

"Of course not," Harry snapped. "They just didn't feed me much."

"And the physical abuse? When did that start?" Remus asked.

"I'm not sure. I can remember Uncle Vernon breaking my arm when I was little, but I don't know how old I was. Usually it was a slap, or a kick. Sometimes Aunt Petunia pulled my hair or shoved me. Dudley liked to push me down the stairs a lot. The heavier stuff didn't start until I'd moved into the bedroom upstairs."

Using a finger to doodle on the tabletop, Harry tilted his head slightly in thought. "I've always had nightmares, but after fourth year they were really bad. I woke up everyone in the house several times and Uncle Vernon tried to show me the 'error of my ways', as he put it. He was careful not to break bones, and the bruises usually healed before school started."

"And you're telling me Dumbledore knew all of this?" Remus asked in disbelief.

"Yes. Although, now that I know about the prophecy and what it said, it makes a little more sense to me. I'm not willing to forgive him for it, though."

"Prophecy?"

"The one about Voldemort and me."

When older man only stared at him blankly, Harry sighed, then rattled off the contents of the prophecy. It wasn't something he was likely to forget anytime soon.

"Wait," Remus said, holding up his hand. "You're telling me that you're the only one who can kill the Dark Lord?"

"His name is Voldemort, Remus..and stop flinching whenever you hear his name! He isn't a "lord" of anything. He's a bigoted half-blood who's not even human anymore. If you can't bring yourself to call him Voldemort, call him Tom. That's what he was called when he went to Hogwarts - Tom Riddle."

"And you're the only one who can kill him?"

"That's what the prophecy says. Dumbledore said that Voldemort... Damn it, Moony, would you stop flinching? It's just a name, for Merlin's sake. What? Do you think he'll suddenly appear if you say his name too many times? Voldemort, Voldemort, Voldemort! Hey, what do you know? He isn't here!"

Grimacing, Remus shook his head. "I think you've made your point, Harry, but it's going to take a bit of getting used to."

Rolling his eyes, Harry leaned back and blew out a breath in frustration. "Anyway, Dumbledore said Voldemort only knew the first two lines of the prophecy. He was desperate to find out the rest, but couldn't go to the Ministry himself to find out, so he managed to trick me into it by sending me visions of Sirius."

"But what about your Occlumency training? I thought that was supposed to be helping you?"

"With Snape teaching it to me? Come on, Moony! It doesn't take a genius to figure out how well that was going to work. Dumbledore's a fool."

"Professor Snape," Remus reminded him gently.

"Not you, too. Look, the man's a sadistic moron. Anyone who can follow a recipe can brew a potion. The understanding of ingredients and their reactions to each other can be learned from a book, as can the knowledge of how to prepare them. The actual brewing process is a simple step by step recipe. Don't believe me?" he challenged when the werewolf looked ready to argue the point. "Then tell me how Hermione managed to brew the Polyjuice potion in our second year! She could probably brew your Wolfsbane, if you asked nicely."

"Second year," Remus breathed.

"Snape is a teacher at Hogwarts because he needed a cover for his spy work. Now, if you think objectively and disregard whatever Dumbledore has told you, I'm willing to bet that most of the stuff Snape brings to the Order is garbage. Now, ask yourself this. What is Snape telling Voldemort?"

"Harry, I'm sure Professor Snape isn't..."

"Of course he isn't," Harry said sarcastically. "That's why he ensured my mind would be more open to Voldemort after each Occlumency lesson, right? Because he thought it would be character building, I suppose?"

"Open your...Wait, Harry. What are you talking about?"

Sighing, Harry leaned forward again. "What do you know about Occlumency training?"

"Just the basics, really," Remus began, frowning. "There's a lot of studying to do. You have to learn to meditate and clear your mind of memories, then learn how to shield your mind. Eventually, you have to put the two together – clearing the mind, keeping your shields in place – all the while remaining aware of what's going on around you. It's a difficult skill to master and takes a lot of reading and practice."

"Right. Well, Snape's version of teaching Occlumency is a bit more straight forward. A shouted command to clear your mind, then casting Legilimency on you and invading your mind, tearing away at it like a dog with a bone. After every lesson I had excruciating headaches and was barely able to remember my own name, let alone keep Voldemort out."

Looking down at his hands, he shook his head. "Had Dumbledore assigned a proper teacher, Voldemort wouldn't have been able to send me visions. I never would have gone to the Ministry and Sirius would be alive today."

"Oh, Harry, you don't know that," Remus said quietly.

"I do know. What's more, I think Dumbledore knows, too. The Headmaster blindly trusts Snape, Moony, but even he realizes that the Occlumency lessons only made things worse, not better. Anyone could have told him that when he assigned Snape as my teacher." Harry snorted. "Any first year who's spent a single week at Hogwarts could tell you that Snape teaching anything to anyone is liable to cause more harm than good. The man is a menace and I doubt he's as loyal you all want to think."

"You know, if you think about it, that makes your typical Hogwarts first year smarter than Dumbledore," Harry said after a moment of thought. "And this is who you choose to follow? This is the man who leads the light? Maybe I should just surrender to Voldemort now."

"He isn't as bad as all that."

"I know Voldemort isn't as bad as everyone makes him out to be, Moony. After all, I've managed to face him six times and live...something unheard of, according to the press."

"I meant Dumbledore," Remus protested, a hint of alarm in his voice.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yes, I know. I was being facetious. Dumbledore may not be as bad as I think, but neither is he as good as the Order believes."

Shaking his head, the werewolf leaned forward, his eyes earnest. "Harry, Dumbledore may not be perfect, but he's always protected you."

"Right," he drawled sarcastically. "If he keeps it up, I'll be dead before I reach my seventeenth birthday."

"That's not -"

Harry raised one hand and made a slashing motion. "Enough," he said, cutting Remus off. "If he's so interested in protecting me, explain to me why my first year Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher was a vessel for Voldemort and the Headmaster didn't even know it."

"It's not like he checks under every turban he comes across," Remus protested.

"He apparently can't tell when one of his teachers is acting oddly, either. Great powers of observation from the mighty Albus Dumbledore, don't you think? No!" he said fiercely when Remus tried to reply. "Leave it for now. Explain instead how Dumbledore could know about the Chamber of Secrets, yet never find the entrance to the thing."

"Only a Parselmouth could have done so," Remus said, a little calmer now, as he was sure of his facts.

"No, only a Parselmouth could open the Chamber. Any schmuck could find it and that schmuck was me, in my second year. Due to Dumbledore's negligence, both Ginny Weasley and I could have been killed. And for all his vaunted knowledge of complicated wards, he never managed to erect one to detect dark objects? Had he done so, the diary would have been found before any of it started.

"But let's not stop there," Harry continued, his green eyes boring into Moony's. "In my fourth year, he allowed a Death Eater into the castle to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts. He allowed Unforgivables to be cast in the school. Rather than canceling the Triwizard Tournament by proclaiming a four way tie and restarting the thing, he made me compete. Nor did he bother to find out who put my name in the cup in the first place, assuming I did it and just wouldn't admit to it. Had he done any of those things, Voldemort wouldn't have a new body right now and Cedric would be alive.

"In fifth year, we got Umbridge and I wouldn't be surprised if the ugly toad was actually a Death Eater. We all know how much our oh, so efficient Minister of Magic enjoys their company. Dumbledore was so busy saving his own ass that he threw me to the wolves." Holding up the back of his right hand, he showed it to Remus. Permanently etching into the flesh were the words 'I must not tell lies'. "A gift from the new Defense teacher, via a blood quill. And I wasn't the only one to experience it."

Remus' eyes widened. "But they're illegal! Did you tell anyone?"

"Who was left to tell? Dumbledore was hiding and all the teachers were so busy trying to keep their jobs that they didn't bother to do their jobs! McGonagall specifically told me to keep my head down and my mouth shut. Not that it would have worked. Umbridge sent Dementors after me over the summer, before she'd even met me! That woman had it in for me from the start."

Running a hand through his messy hair, Harry sighed. "Look, this is all in the notebook I gave you. If you didn't believe what I wrote down, why I am I trying to convince you now? You'll follow Dumbledore, no matter what I try to tell you, and you'll continue to shit yourself every time Voldemort's name is mentioned. Merlin help you if you ever have to face him.

"But think about this. I've faced him, in one way or another, six times, twice in my first year at Hogwarts alone. Six times, Moony, and I'm still alive. Me, a fifteen year old kid. What does that tell you about the 'most powerful Dark Lord ever'? Most people, when they're face to face with him, panic, get stupid and end up dead. It's the same when they face his Death Eaters.

"He's not completely human anymore, but neither is he a god. Dumbledore may think that I'm the only one who can kill him, but that doesn't mean others can't injure him. I'm betting, however, that Dumbledore won't allow that. The Order and the Ministry don't take the fight to Tom or his Death Eaters. They simply react to his attacks and it's usually too late to save anyone. When the time comes for me to face the bastard and try to kill him, I'm going to be facing not only him, but his servants."

Pushing away from the table, Harry stood up and looked down at Remus. "I'm pretty good at Defense, but what do you think the odds

of me surviving a fight like that will be? I wouldn't put any money down on it, if I were you."

Tired and defeated, he walked out the kitchen door, leaving Remus to his thoughts.

Mrs. Weasley arrived that afternoon, bringing supplies to restock the pantry. Her entrance caused Mrs. Black to sing her lovely song of pure-blood supremacy and blood traitors once again. Hearing the commotion from his room, Harry grinned and began to hum a tune he thought complimented the shrieking rather well.

Hoping to see Ron and Hermione, he put down the book he'd been reading – part of the stash he'd pilfered from the library - and went downstairs to greet Mrs. Weasley. After arriving in the kitchen and escaping her notorious hug, he smiled and asked about his friends.

"I'm sorry, dear, they couldn't come," Molly said, not meeting his eyes.

"Why?"

"Oh, well, you know how these things are," she said, opening cupboards and putting groceries away.

"No, I don't. Why couldn't they come?"

"Because Dumbledore wouldn't allow it," Alastor Moody said as he walked into the kitchen. "Said it was too dangerous for them."

"Alastor!" Molly gasped, her eyes darting to Harry.

"The headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix is too dangerous?" Harry asked intently.

Moody shrugged. "That's what Dumbledore said."

"Too dangerous for what?" Harry asked, staring at the man.

"Kids, apparently," he replied over Molly's objections.

"What am I? A small adult?" Harry asked snidely.

"Dunno, Potter. You'd have to ask the old man."

"Mrs. Weasley?" he said softly, turning to look at the woman.

"I'm sorry, dear. Dumbledore told me not to bring them. Believe me, they both wanted to come. I thought I'd have to cast a silencing charm on Ron, he was yelling so much," she said, shaking her head in dismay.

"But they haven't written to me or anything," he mumbled, looking down at his feet.

"No mail, except school related," Moody grouched. "Look, Potter, I'll be truthful with you. I think Dumbledore's making a mistake with his handling of you."

"I don't need 'handling'!" Harry snarled.

"I agree. I've told Dumbledore I don't agree with what's happening here, but he won't listen. Didn't listen when I told him he was making a mistake with Black, either. That didn't turn out so well, did it?"

"Who knows about this no friends, no mail business?" Harry asked.

"The Order," Mrs. Weasley said quietly.

"All of the Order? Even Remus?"

"Yep, all of us," Moody told him. "Made Snape happier than I've seen him in ages."

"I'll just bet. Great greasy bastard!"

"Harry!" Mrs. Weasley admonished. "Watch your language!"

"I can only do that when I'm writing, and as I don't intend to give up verbal communication any time soon, you'll have to forgive me if I refuse your kind instructions," Harry said snidely.

Mrs. Weasley's eyes widened at his comment, but Moody laughed.

"That's it, kid. Tell it like you see it," the man cheered.

Shaking his head, Harry turned to leave. "Oh, yeah. You might want to avoid the refrigerator. It bites," he called over his shoulder as he left.

Climbed the stairs from the kitchen, he heard the muffled scream from Mrs. Weasley and a shouted expletive from Moody. Knowing they'd just discovered the creature living in the refrigerator, he grinned.

Reaching the landing for the ground floor, he turned for the stairs. Spotting Mrs. Black's portrait, he stopped for a moment. Humming the tune he'd made up, he punched the painting. Just as he expected, the curtain sprung open and Mrs. Black began to sing. Cursing from the kitchen told him the adults would soon be up to quiet the old crone.

Running up the stairs to his room, he tried not to laugh. Sure, it was childish, but it was amusing, too.

Entering his bedroom, he closed the door and spotted Hedwig. She was perched on the headboard of his bed, glaring at her cage.

"Don't worry, girl. I won't force you into it," he told her as he approached. Reaching out, he caressed her feathers gently and she nipped at him affectionately.

He turned away from the owl with a sigh and went to his trunk. Having nothing better to do, he rummaged around until he found the last of his summer assignments. Dragging books, parchment, quill and ink over to the desk, he sat down and organized his workspace, something that would have shocked Hermione, had she seen it.

After sharpening his quill, he uncapped the bottle of ink and set to work.

A knock on his bedroom door sometime later had him looking up in confusion as he focused on something other than his Transfiguration essay. He was almost finished with it and wasn't happy to be interrupted.

"What?" he called irritably.

The door opened and Remus walked in, smiling and carrying a tray of sandwiches and a pot of tea. "I brought you lunch. There's some owl treats for Hedwig, too."

"Why didn't you just call me down?" Harry asked as he put down his quill and massaged the writing cramp from his hand.

"An Order meeting is due to start in half an hour or so. You'll have to stay in your room, I'm afraid."

When Harry scowled, Remus put the tray on the desk and held up a hand. "I know it's aggravating, but it won't last long and it will give you time to eat and finish your homework," the older man said with a gentle smile.

Shrugging, Harry picked up the pot of tea and filled his cup. "So, when are Ron and Hermione going to be here?" he asked casually.

"I'm not sure. It shouldn't be too much longer, though," Remus said, looking away.

"Liar," Harry hissed as he put down the teapot. "Moody already told me they're not coming!"

Remus grimaced. "I'm sorry, Harry. Dumbledore said -"

"Oh, right, Dumbledore said. I guess it must be true, then." Standing, he faced the man. "Careful, Moony. If you and the rest of the Order shove your heads any further up Dumbledore's ass, people will mistake him for a Hydra!"

"Harry," Remus began.

"Get out," Harry said quietly, his teeth clenched.

"We should talk about all this anger you have toward -"

"I said, get out," Harry repeated. Reaching into his pocket of his jeans, he pulled out his wand.

"You can't use magic, Harry," Remus exclaimed, alarmed.

"If you reach for your wand, you'll find out just how good I am at Defense," Harry snarled as the werewolf's hand twitched toward the pocket of his robe. "And if you're not out of my room in two seconds, you'll regret it."

"You'll be expelled," Remus all but shouted.

"I don't want to go back to Hogwarts, anyway," Harry said. "Oh, and that's one."

"Don't be foolish!"

"And that's two!" Pointing his wand at the man, he snarled, "Expelliarmus!" Catching the man's wand easily, he shoved it into his back pocket. "Silencio! Incarcerous!"

Moony's eyes widened in shock as he found himself disarmed, silenced and immobilized before he'd quite realized what happened.

"Not all harmful spells have to be black, Professor," Harry said, imitating Remus' lecturing style. "You see, the intent behind the spell can be just as harmful."

Looking at the older man with utter disgust, he shook his head. "You know, I honestly don't know who's worse; the Order or Voldemort and his inbred morons! If you're an example of what the Order has to offer, I might as well give myself over to the next Death Eater I see.

"Because of some prophecy that old bat, Trelawney, spat out, I'm supposed to kill one of the most powerful Dark Lord's our world's ever seen? Me? A sixteen year old kid, who's had no training? That's Dumbledore's great plan and you're all following behind him, merrily marching me off to my death!"

Harry's shoulders slumped and he rubbed a hand over his face tiredly. "I don't know why I'm bothering to talk to you. You can't see past Dumbledore's beard long enough to see that the son of one of your best friends is being set up to die. And the worst part is, you don't care, do you? So long as I do my job and save this world – a world I'm not sure is worth my life to save – you'll tell any lie, take away any choices I may have.

"I want you to know that I didn't plan any of this," he continued, waving a hand toward the bound man. "But when Dumbledore brought me here, I couldn't stand it. All I can remember is how much Sirius hated being here. Then, having you lie to me, it's just too much. I won't go so far as to say you caused all of this, but you certainly didn't help matters. Remember that, in the days to come."

Harry's eyes narrowed slightly in thought. "Now, to set the trap. Wingardium Leviosa!"

Remus' feet left the ground and Harry smiled impishly. "Who knew werewolves could fly? Ah, well, come along then!"

Guiding the floating man out of the bedroom, he turned toward the stairwell. With a few flicks of his wand, he had Remus over the rail, dangling helplessly.

"This is going to hurt you a lot more than it will hurt me, Moony. Enjoy the ride," Harry taunted.

Remus' eyes were wide and frightened. He opened his mouth, and Harry was sure he was screaming. Waving his wand, he ended the spell, and the man fell.

The crash at the bottom was loud, as Remus had managed to land on and break the table in the hall. Mrs. Black began to shriek, and shouting could be heard from the kitchen.

Crouching down on the stairs, Harry took aim through the rails.

Mrs. Weasley came charging up the stairs from the kitchen, muttering to herself. Seeing Remus trussed up and sprawled on the floor, she froze for a moment. It was all Harry needed.

"Stupefy!" he said quietly.

Mrs. Weasley hit the floor, unconscious. Standing, Harry quickly bound her, then floated her closer to Remus.

Couching down again, he waited. Expecting the arrival of the next person to come from the direction of the kitchen stairs, he jumped when the front door opened.

"Remus? Molly? What's going on?" Tonks cried as she rushed to them.

"Stupefy!" Harry hissed, then watched as she fell. Binding her like the others, he went back to waiting. He'd have to watch both entrances, but it shouldn't be too hard.

Over the next twenty minutes, he managed to stun and bind ten Order members, whether they came in through the front door or up from the kitchen. He took the greatest pleasure in capturing Dumbledore and Snape.

Examining the rather large mound of bodies he'd managed to stack up like cord wood, he realized someone was missing.

"I haven't enjoyed such an amusing display in a long time, Potter," Mad-Eye Moody called from the kitchen stairs.

Harry ducked down, trying to find cover.

"Don't be foolish, boy. Had I wanted to take you out, I'd have done so before now. I've been watching you take them down one by one, after all."

"Are we going to fight about this, Moody?" Harry asked curiously.

"Of course not, Potter. But you can't leave me unmolested. It would look a bit odd, don't you think? Now, listen carefully. I don't like what Dumbledore is doing. I've told you that. Unlike the rest of the Order, I know what the prophecy says. Are you listening?"

"Yes," Harry said, a bit puzzled.

"Good. Now, when I come up, you'll need to stun and bind me like the others. Go easy, kid. I hate having to replace this blasted leg. It takes forever to break them in. Once I'm out, remove us from the house. Stack us up in the backyard, or toss us out on the front lawn. It makes no difference to me. Once we're gone, call the elf."

"Elf? What elf?" Harry asked.

"The crazy one! Kreacher! Tell him to ward the house against us."

"Why would he listen to me, a half-blood?"

"You own the house now, Potter. Didn't Dumbledore... No, I guess he wouldn't. All right, listen. Sirius left you everything. The house, his money, all his possessions are yours, including that blasted elf. When we're out of the house, command the elf to bar us from re-entering."

"I understand. It still seems a bit odd, you helping me and all," Harry told him.

Moody climbed the last few stairs, becoming visible to Harry. He grinned, and held both hands up, showing he was unarmed.

"Dumbledore's getting more foolish with each passing year and he's dragging down the collective intelligence of the Order with him." Moody shook his head. "You caught Dumbledore as he entered the house. Didn't you wonder why no one asked me to have a look around with my eye? No one had to leave the kitchen to investigate, but they're all as foolish as the old man."

"I can't argue with you there," Harry said. "Accio Moody's wand!"

"Smart, kid," Moody told him. "Though you should have done that as soon as you saw me."

Scratching his ear with his wand, Harry nodded. "I know. I was so busy thinking about what you were saying that I didn't -"

"Stop!" Moody bellowed. "You want to blow off your ear? Lower your wand, Potter!"

Training his wand on Moody again, Harry scowled. "I wasn't going to cast anything."

"Accidental magic has caused more than one mishap. Remember, constant vigilance!" he barked.

"Yes, sir," Harry said, trying not to roll his eyes.

"Okay, it's time to clean house, kid. If you need any help with Occlumency or Defense, send me an owl. I'll do what I can to help

you, or find people who can. And you can guarantee they won't be Order members!"

"Thank you, sir," Harry said quietly. Casting a quick cushioning charm, he stunned Moody and watched as he landed on the floor, though much more gently than the others. Binding him, he levitated him to the front door, opened it, and floated him out to the weed choked lawn.

One by one, the other Order members followed, all bound and unconscious. Dumbledore he dropped to the ground from a greater height than the others. Snape, he bounced out the front door.

He eyed the mass of bodies, thinking. Then, ducking behind the front door, he peeked around it and trained his wand on them. "Accio wands!"

Ten wands shot through the front door and skittered down the hall. With a few flicks of his wand, he managed to collect them all and dump them into the umbrella stand where he would collect them later.

Looking outside again, he smiled evilly when he spotted Snape. Waving his wand and muttering, he stripped the man naked and tattooed the words 'Hug Me!' on his forehead.

Not quite done, Harry lifted his wand and wrote something in fiery letters in the air in front of himself. Then, moving the burning sign to hover over Snape's head, he modified the spell to not only follow the Potion Master wherever he went, but twisted it so that only the Potion Master himself could dispel it.

Examining his handwork, he decided that the sign was a bit too hard to read in the bright sunlight. Changing the color of the flames slightly, the words 'I'm a Death Eater!' now shown a bright yellowish red. Hermione was right. It was amazing what a few hours of concentrated reading could teach a person.

Nodding once, Harry closed the front door and leaned against it. Taking a deep breath, he called out for Kreacher.

With a small pop, Kreacher appeared in front of Harry and bowed low. The elf refused to look at him.

"Nasty, half-blood master call Kreacher?"

"I did, yes," Harry told him. "I'm about to make your day, Kreacher. I want you to reset the wards on the Noble House of Black. From this day on, no member of the Order of the Phoenix is allowed to enter this house. Only I, or those I designate, will be allowed entrance."

The aged elf looked up at Harry with rheumy eyes. "Filthy master would do this for Kreacher?"

"No, your filthy mas...Er, your master is doing this for both of us," Harry told him.

"No more hairy werewolf? No more blood traitors?" Kreacher asked, his eyes wide with surprise.

"That's right. Seal the house. For now, only I may enter. Set the wards so that only those I invite into the house can cross the wards. Everyone else is to be forcefully ejected!"

Kreacher's face split into the ugliest smile Harry had ever seen. The elf's teeth were rotten and black, and his breath, when he let out a whoop of excitement, nearly bowled him over.

Raising his gnarled arms, the elf mumbled something under his breath, then clapped twice. The house shook violently and dust rained down on them. Harry grabbed the door frame behind him to steady himself and wondered if the old house would collapse around them.

When the shaking stopped, Kreacher hopped twice and spun around. "We be free of filthy, traitorous wizards," he exclaimed. Then he looked up at Harry. "Except you, master. We still have you," he muttered.

"And I'm afraid you're stuck with me, Kreacher," Harry said, blandly. "Now, then, a few new rules. You are not allowed to leave the house, for any reason, unless I tell you to go somewhere. Nor are you allowed to communicate with anyone outside this house, unless I've given you permission to do so."

Kreacher scowled.

"I'm afraid it's going to get worse before I'm done," Harry told him, amused. "Mrs. Black's portrait will be removed."

"No!" the elf protested, loudly. "Filthy new master can't remove it!"

"I'm not going to remove it. You will. In exchange for doing this, I'm going to give it to you. Take it to your room and keep it."

"New muggle loving master will give Mistress to Kreacher?" he asked, his ugly face full of hope.

"Yes, but there will be a small modification made to it first."

Turning, he approached the portrait and pulled back the moth eaten curtains. Mrs. Black began her harangue and Harry did roll his eyes. Lifting his wand, he applied the tip to Mrs. Black's screeching mouth and whispered a spell.

Canceling the spell, he stepped back and frowned slightly. The spell had worked. Mrs. Black's mouth had been burned away. But the tip of his wand was larger than the area he'd meant to get rid of. As a result, Sirius' mother now had no nose and very little chin left, but at least she was silent.

Sighing, Harry stepped away from the painting and waved Kreacher closer. "It's yours, now. Take it down and get it out of here."

The elf wasn't happy with his new master for many reasons, not the least of which being that he'd mutilated his mistress! Grumbling under his breath about ugly scar-headed masters, he reached up and grabbed the painting.

A sound much like fingernails on a chalkboard rang through the hall and Harry clapped his hands over his ears. When the portrait finally came loose with a sucking pop, the frightful sound ended and Kreacher turned to face him, the painting held tightly to his small chest.

"Kreacher will be taking this away," he said in a grumble. "Mistress would be very displeased by Kreacher's actions. Kreacher much punish himself now."

"You will not punish yourself," Harry commanded in disgust. "Now, go. I'll call you when I need you again."

Kreacher bowed again, or tried to. The portrait made it rather awkward. He muttered to himself as he turned and popped away with a loud cracking sound.

Harry frowned. He'd have to be very careful what orders he gave the elf. The evil tempered creature was sneaky, and he knew if his instructions weren't specific, Kreacher would interpret them as he chose.

Shrugging the problem away for the moment, he bound up the stairs and walked into one of the front bedrooms. Moving to the window, he opened it carefully, pulled aside the filthy curtains to look down at the lawn. What he saw nearly made him laugh out loud.

Most of his victims were awake and struggling with their bonds. Mundungus Fletcher had obviously arrived late for the Order meeting and now stood on the sidewalk, holding his sides and howling with laughter.

A harsh word from Dumbledore had the squat, shabby man straightening and waving his wand. He released the Headmaster first, then moved on to the others.

When Snape stood up, he tried desperately to cover his nakedness. Tonks, seeing the flaming words hanging above the dark man's head, covered her mouth and pointed to it.

Everyone turned to stare. Snape, not sure what was happening, looked up and his eyes widened in horror.

"Headmaster!" he shrieked, doing a fine imitation of Mrs. Black.

"Dung, give Severus your coat," Dumbledore ordered. Then, checking several pockets in his robe, he scowled. "I seem to have misplaced my wand."

"Harry has mine," Remus muttered angrily as Snape wrapped himself in the filthy overcoat Fletcher gave him.

"Mine is missing, too," Elphias Doge growled.

"And mine," Tonks said, glancing back at the house.

Hestia, Emmeline, Kingsley, Molly and Dedalus all confirmed that their wands were missing.

"Alastor?" Dumbledore asked, hopefully.

"The kid disarmed me when I came up the stairs," Moody replied.

"Isn't that interesting," Snape sneered. "How is it your magical eye didn't see what the brat was doing?"

Moody shrugged. "It did."

"Why didn't you warn us?" Molly asked angrily.

"Because you didn't ask," he growled. "You kept sending people up to check on those missing like a group of first years afraid of the dark. I must say, I found the whole thing very amusing."

When Snape took a menacing step forward, Mad-Eye tensed. "The aurors are going to get you, boy. And about damn time, too," he snarled, staring the flaming words above the man's head.

Snape spun towards Dumbledore. "Headmaster?" he asked fearfully.

"Dung, dispel that, won't you?" Dumbledore asked, pointed at the floating words.

"Shouldn't it have disappeared when I untied him?" Dung asked, scratching his head. When the Headmaster only continued to stare at him and wait, he shrugged and raised his wand again. "Finite Incantatem!"

Nothing happened.

Dung stared down at his wand for a moment, gaping.

"You must not have done it right," Snape said, gritting his teeth. "Try it again, you fool!"

Several attempts later, Dung lowered his wand, giving up. "It's no use."

Moody laughed. "All right, Potter! What did you do?" he yelled.

"I tied the spell to his own magical signature," came the answer.

The members of the Order all spun around. There, in the upper window, stood Harry Potter, grinning impishly.

"Very good, Potter. That's some tricky spell work," Moody complimented.

Harry shrugged. "It's amazing what one can pick up in books."

Moody slapped his knee and hooted with laughter.

"Alastor, do you mind?" Molly hissed.

"Harry, where are our wands?" Tonks asked.

"Here, in the house. I placed them all in the umbrella stand," he replied.

"Underage magic is strictly prohibited. You'll be expelled for this, Potter," Snape ground out, though his eyes gleamed with pleasure.

"I don't see any Ministry owls, Professor," Harry commented. "Interestingly enough, the Ministry doesn't seem to be able to detect the use of magic from Headquarters. Must be that pesky Fidelius charm."

Smiling grandly, Dumbledore strode forward. "This has all been very amusing, Harry. But we do have a meeting to attend today. I'm afraid this game will have to continue another time."

Reaching the front door, Dumbledore grasped the knob. The sound of a thunderclap rang through the yard and the Headmaster was thrown back ten feet from the house. He crashed into Emmeline Vance and both fell to the ground, hard.

Into the silence that followed, Harry's laugh rang out.

"I don't think so, Professor," he called down from the window. "It's my game, after all, and I want to keep playing."

Shacklebolt and Tonks helped Dumbledore to his feet. Emmeline scrambled up on her own and brushed the dirt and dead grass from her robes.

Dumbledore looked up at the boy in the window, his eyes wide. "But how?"

"It's simple really," Harry told him, leaning against the window frame. "I own the house now. I can't do anything about the Fidelius charm yet, but the other warding was easy enough to change."

"How did you find out about that?" Snape asked.

"I told him," Alastor said.

Dumbledore spun around and faced the man, his gaze fierce. "Why? Why would you do such a thing when you knew the boy was angry?"

"There was no reason to hide it," Moody countered. "You've all kept him in the dark, kept him a prisoner. Am I the only one who sees how wrong you've all been?"

As the argument on the lawn continued, Harry turned away from the window and called for Kreacher. Several minutes later, he leaned back against the window frame and braced himself.

When the house began to tremble again, those out on the lawn watched fearfully.

"Harry? What's going on?" Molly asked, alarmed. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Mrs. Weasley. Oh, and by the way, here are your wands," he called back. Then, one by one, he snapped them and tossed them out the window until there was only one left in his hand.

Several Order members cried out and rushed forward, but there was nothing they could do.

Rolling a piece of parchment into a tube, he then slid it over the last wand and gently levitated it out the window. Floating it down to Mad-

Eye, he lowered it enough that the man could reach out and pluck it from the air.

Sliding the parchment off his wand, Moody unrolled it and read the note quickly.

Mr. Moody,

You've been truthful with me and I owe you a great deal for the information you've given me. I may take you up on your offer of help in the coming days. I think I'm going to need it.

The wards on the house have been reset and you are allowed to enter. You will be evicted, violently and automatically, if you raise your wand on me, so be warned. As you say, constant vigilance!

Harry

After incinerating the note, Moody looked up, a grin on his face. "Understood, Potter!" Turning away, he moved toward the sidewalk.

Nodding, Harry reached up to close the window. "This has been fun, but I do have other plans." Laughing heartily, he slammed the window shut and let the drapes fall closed.

"Where do you think you're going, Alastor?" Dumbledore demanded.

"Home, old man. I've got things to do," Moody replied before apparating away.

"Now what do we do, Albus?" Molly asked, worriedly. "Harry's all alone in that house!"

"No, he has Kreacher," Dumbledore murmured, his eyes narrowed as he turned around and stared at the house.

"Just like Sirius," Tonks murmured quietly to Remus.

Wrapping his arms around himself, Remus closed his eyes. New battle lines had been drawn, and he was very much afraid he'd chosen the wrong side.

Entering his bedroom, Harry spotted the tray Remus had brought up earlier and realized how hungry he was. Sitting down at the desk, he grabbed a sandwich and began to eat. When he finished, he filled a cup with lukewarm tea and sipped thoughtfully as he glanced down at the homework still spread across his desk.

Putting his cup down, he stacked his homework to one side, then reached into his pocket and pulled out the small notebook Remus had returned to him. Flipping through it quickly, he found where he'd left off, and reached for his quill. If he was going to keep a record, he figured he might as well update the thing to include the events of the last few days.

Ollivander's, Diagon Alley, later that afternoon...

The Order members arrived outside Ollivander's wand shop. At Snape's urgings, Dung had managed to transfigure his overcoat into something that resembled a robe. He'd also managed to blur the fiery sign over Snape's head and the tattoo. It was still there, but at least no one could read it!

Opening the door, Dumbledore led the way into the darkened shop. Mr. Ollivander's head popped up from behind the counter and his moon-like eyes widened at seeing how many people had entered.

"Albus?" Mr. Ollivander breathed. "What has happened to bring you and your group to my shop?"

"Gabriel," Dumbledore said with a nod. "I'm afraid we've run into a spot of trouble."

Gabriel Ollivander's eyes narrowed as he scanned the group. His gaze stopped on Snape and his lips twitched. "Nice sign work," he commented. Turning back to Dumbledore, he smirked. "I see you've had a run in with Mr. Potter."

"How did you know?" Molly exclaimed.

Snape's jaw tightened. Tonks, standing next to him, shuddered. She could hear his teeth grinding.

"That brat has snapped our wands," Snape snarled.

"Severus!"

Snape's eyes snapped to Dumbledore's, then down at his feet.

Turning away from his potion master, Dumbledore smiled at Ollivander. "It was simply a game that got out of hand," he explained. "I'm afraid we'll all need new wands."

"Game?" Ollivander asked. "You are mistaken, Headmaster. The remnants of Potter's anger surrounds you. No, this was no game."

Albus frowned and straightened his shoulders. "We haven't much time, Gabriel. If we could begin, please?"

"Let's begin with you then, shall we?" Ollivander asked. When the Headmaster nodded, he shuffled toward a shelf and began to mutter to himself. "Hickory, I believe. Twelve inches..."

Early morning, Tonks' apartment...

Remus rolled over onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. He'd made his home at Grimmauld, somehow thinking it brought him closer to Sirius. When Harry had evicted the Order, he'd quickly found himself homeless. Tonks had offered to let him sleep on her couch and, having no place else to go, he'd accepted.

They'd both decided to call it an early night, but Remus was unable to sleep. He'd been shifting around on the uncomfortable sofa for several hours as thoughts of Harry careened through his mind.

Dumbledore had stood up for him for so long, even going so far as to give him a teaching position, that Remus felt he owed the man. But after reading Harry's notebook and seeing Dumbledore's highhandedness for himself, he found himself doubting the leader of the Order for the first time.

He'd been shocked at the depth of Harry's anger, but as he thought about it, he realized how naive he'd been. The young man had been through hell, and not just at home with his relatives. His experiences at Hogwarts alone would have been enough to cause any fifteen year old to lash out. Yet Harry had handled everything thrown at him with a maturity and levelheadedness not normally found in one so

young. He'd managed to survive each meeting with Voldemort, something not many adult, fully trained wizards could claim.

But at the end of Harry's fifth year, the events leading up to and including Sirius' death had caused a profound change in the boy, and Remus wasn't so sure anymore that Harry wasn't right in making those changes. Everything Harry had said about both the Ministry and the Order's reactions to Voldemort's return were correct. They really weren't doing all they could to prepare Harry, or to take the fight to the Dark Lord.

Fear might have had something to do with it, at least when it came to the Ministry. But Remus couldn't wrap his mind around Dumbledore being afraid of Voldemort. They'd always been told it was the other way around!

And why hadn't Dumbledore begun training for Harry? Remus didn't count Snape's Occlumency lessons as any sort of real training. If what Harry said was correct, the man only made things worse and may have been one of the reasons Sirius was now dead.

Remus closed his eyes tightly at the thought of Sirius. He would be more than disappointed if he knew that Remus had sided with Dumbledore over his godson. He didn't want to think about what James and Lily would have said.

When the bedroom door opened and Tonks walked into the living room, Remus realized he hadn't noticed the steady lightening of the sky through the window. Frowning, he sat up tiredly, startling Tonks.

"Damn, Remus. I forgot you were here," she exclaimed, clutching a hand to her heart.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

She waved his apology away and looked at him carefully. "You look like shit. Didn't you sleep?"

Shaking his head, he ran a hand through his graying hair. "No. I couldn't stop thinking about Harry."

"Don't worry. Dumbledore will figure out how to get him out of Headquarters. I still can't believe he snapped our wands! I know he

had it rough at home, but that's no reason to take it out on us. We've done everything to help him and he's treating us like we're the enemy," she grouched as she walked into the kitchen. With a few flicks of her wand, she had tea ready.

"I think we might be," Remus told her quietly.

"What? Remus, you can't be serious!" she said, coming out of the kitchen with two cups of tea. "What have we done that's so terrible?" She handed him one of the cups and sat down next to him on the couch.

He sipped his tea, then looked at her. "He didn't want to come to Headquarters. Why would he? Most of his memories of that place are tied up with Sirius. His godfather has been dead for a few short weeks. Why would he want to be reminded of that?"

"I loved him too, Remus," she said sadly. "But you don't see me throwing a fit and hurting the people trying to help me."

"No one forced you to go to Headquarters against your will, either. How many people asked how you were doing after Sirius died? How many people have checked on your well being in the last few weeks? No one bothered to do that with Harry. Dumbledore insisted he needed to be left alone to grieve."

"Everyone grieves differently," she explained.

"Yes, but if Harry had been allowed visitors, we would have known about his situation at home much sooner. Haven't you ever wondered why Dumbledore insisted that no one speak to Harry? Not just this year, but every year since he started Hogwarts?"

"Not really. I assumed he had his reasons," she said, shrugging.

Remus closed his eyes and shook his head. "Now I understand what Harry meant."

"When? What are you talking about?"

"Never mind," he said, standing up. He put his cup down on the table next to the couch and stared down at her. "Thank you for the use of the couch, Tonks."

"You're leaving?" she asked, puzzled. "Don't you want to shower or something?"

"No, I need to leave," he said, walking to the front door and opening it.

"Will I see you tonight?"

He turned to face her. "I don't think so. I'll find somewhere else to stay. Goodbye, Tonks." Walking out, he closed the door softly behind him and made his way to the nearest apparation point.

Tonks frowned at the closed door. Unsure of what she'd said to chase him off, she went back through the conversation in her mind. Unable to figure it out, she sat back on the couch and took a sip of tea.

She wasn't sure when she'd fallen in love with Remus. It had been so gradual, she almost hadn't noticed it. She'd invited him to stay with her in the hopes that she'd be able to make him see that she wasn't just a girl with a crush, but a woman who understood what real love was.

Sitting forward, she put her cup on the coffee table and all but growled. The situation with Harry had ruined her plans and she wasn't pleased.

Standing, she walked toward the bedroom. The Order was going to meet today to discuss the situation. Perhaps Dumbledore would come up with a solution.

Authors Note:

If your fingers are itching to hit the review button to tell me all the things I screwed up in canon, bite me. If you've ever read any of our stories, you know better than that.

Did I screw with canon? Yep, and very happily. Why? Because it suited my perverse sense of humor. See, I like to imagine all those canon freaks out there frothing at the mouth, ready to point out every instance where I "got it wrong", only to keel over onto the floor,

throwing a tantrum to rival a four year old when I nod calmly and say, "Yep, and I did it on purpose, so neener, neener, boo, boo!"

You know the drill, boys and girls, ladies and gentlemen, perverts and prudes! Review, or no cookies for you!

Disclaimer:

Alyx stared at the blank page, fingers hovering over the keyboard. She became aware of heavy panting behind her, and slowly turned to see Bob leaning down, staring at the screen.

"What are you doing?" she asked him.

"Making sure you don't put me in another thong. The bustier wasn't bad, but the butt floss..." He shuddered dramatically.

She raised an eyebrow. "You don't seem to have a problem when I'm the one wearing it."

He shrugged. "You don't have a hairy ass."

"You know, I think there are some things our readers really don't need to know," she grumbled.

"You don't want them to know you don't have a hairy ass?"

"I don't care about my ass, you ass! I don't think they want to know about your ass!" She blinked. "And I think that's enough asses in this disclaimer. Damnit, Bob. Why do you do this? I had a nice, neat disclaimer all lined up, and you just had to barge your way into it, didn't you?"

"Well, it's one way of making sure you don't make me cross dress again."

"Let me remind you that I have several more chapters of this story to disclaim, and I haven't finished this one yet," she told him, glaring dangerously.

He flinched. "Actually, dear, I think you are." Turning to face the readers, he quickly muttered the magic words. "We don't own Harry Potter!"

"Robert!" she bellowed and stood up.

"Oh, crap!" Spinning on his heels, he raced out of the office.

Yanking open her toy chest, Alyx selected a spiked bullwhip and her FPIA. She walked to the door, then stopped and faced the readers. "Enjoy the story folks. And if you hear screaming in the background, it's nothing to worry about. He enjoys it. Really!" With a firm nod, she turned and left the office.

Grimmauld Place...

The morning light shone through the window, waking Harry. Blinking himself awake, he sat up and stretched, feeling better than he had in a long time.

Climbing out of bed, he said good morning to Hedwig and checked her water and food. Though she was hunting for herself now, he knew she liked having her dish full of food. He was convinced she felt neglected when he forgot to do so, and she tended to be more nippy than usual, and not in the cute, affectionate way she usually nipped at him. When she felt Harry wasn't doing his duty by her, she tended to draw blood...usually from his earlobes.

Finished, he stripped off his clothes and went to take a shower. As he stood under the hot spray, he realized he didn't have to rush. There would be no fat cousin to drag him gleefully from the shower this morning!

Half an hour later, a pink skinned Boy-Who-Lived reentered his bedroom, a towel around his waist. Dragging clothes from his trunk, he quickly dried off and got dressed.

Sitting down at the desk, he dragged the last summer assignment towards him and scowled. He'd left his Potions essay for last, and seriously thought about not doing it. He didn't give a rat's ass about the class and didn't plan on taking it next year. But Snape, ever the asshole, had insisted that he complete the assignment, and the Headmaster had agreed.

Sharpening his quill, he glared down at the blank parchment and thought for a moment. Then, dipping his quill into his ink bottle, he got down to work, explaining the hazards of mixing belladonna with chocolate pudding. He wrote it all out, rather painstakingly, in Parseltongue. The subject had nothing to do with what Snape had actually assigned, but the greasy bastard couldn't understand, let alone read, Parseltongue, so it didn't much matter anyway.

Concentrating hard on his homework, the pain caught him by surprise. His scar throbbed, but it wasn't as strong as normal. Dropping his quill, he slapped one hand over his scar and ground his teeth.

A potions essay in Parseltongue? Whatever is the boy thinking? Severus will fail him for that.

Harry blinked rather owlshly as the pain lessened somewhat. He began to question his sanity as the voice in his head began to speak once more.

If the boy fails potions, it will be harder to keep an eye on him. No matter. I will simply instruct Severus to allow the boy to continue the class.

Harry's eyes widened when he realized whose thoughts he was hearing.

"Great. Not only is the slimy bastard trying to kill me, now he's trying to drive me insane," he muttered, still clutching at his scar.

Hmm. An insane Potter could work to my advantage.

"Oh, stuff it, you lip-less freak!" Harry bellowed.

The voice was silent, and Harry breathed a sigh of relief. The pain was gone, so he dropped his hand and laid his head on the desk.

Potter?

"Shut up, you wanker," Harry mumbled.

You can hear me? The voice sounded incredulous.

"No, I often talk to myself. Of course I can hear you, moron!"

But how is this possible?

"Fuck if I know," Harry grouched. "You're the mighty Dark Lord. You figure it out."

Manners, Potter! Voldemort sounded rather testy, which made Harry grin.

"Or what? You'll kill me? Oh wait, you've been trying to do that for years now and haven't succeeded."

Something isn't right, here. I must think on this.

"Good luck with that. I hear snakes have rather small brains. Don't strain yourself too much," Harry said cheerfully.

You will beg for death before I'm finished with you, Potter, Voldemort snarled.

Harry frowned as thoughts, obviously not his own, flashed through his mind. "Yeah, yeah. You've said that before. To be honest, you're starting to sound a bit pathetic."

That muggle loving Headmaster of yours won't be able to protect you forever!

"Dumbledore's a fool, Tom," Harry said scathingly. "I think we've finally found one point we can agree on."

The voice was silent for so long, Harry thought Voldemort had pulled away.

You and Dumbledore have had a falling out? the Dark Lord asked cautiously.

"Something like that, yeah. And yes, I know. I'm sure you're thinking you can use that to your advantage." Harry leaned back on his chair and rolled his eyes.

The reply, when it came, sounded shocked. How did you know that?

Harry's eyes narrowed slightly. "You didn't honestly think this freakish link worked only one way, did you?"

You can read my thoughts? Voldemort shrieked.

"Whoa!" Harry exclaimed. "Not so loud!"

You didn't answer my question, Potter!

"Because the answer is obvious, you idiot," he muttered.

I must think on this.

"Yeah, so you've said. Mind keeping your thoughts to yourself, though? I really don't need to listen to the deranged ramblings of a Dark Lord, thank you very much," he said snidely.

When Voldemort didn't reply, Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

Standing, he walked to the window and stared out at the backyard, thinking over what had just taken place.

He hadn't exactly lied when he'd implied he could read the Dark Lord's mind. Twice, when Voldemort was angry or shocked, he'd caught the madman's fleeting thoughts. He wasn't sure how it had happened or if it could be of any benefit to him, as he didn't know if it the link would be repeated.

Harry's smile was mostly teeth. Voldemort had seemed a bit rattled, and that could only be to the good. The tables had been turned this time, and he found that he rather liked the idea of a jumpy Dark Lord.

Glancing at his bed and the books he'd hidden under the mattress, he realized that research was in order. Grimmauld was full of books. He might just find something to help him exploit the strange link if the opportunity arose.

Hogwarts Great Hall, afternoon...

Most of the teachers had left the school for the summer holiday. Those who remained in the castle and were not members of the Order had been informed that the Great Hall would be used for a private meeting and were asked to respect the privacy of those within. As this was a common occurrence over the last several years, no one raised an eyebrow over Dumbledore's request.

The members of the Order had already arrived and been served refreshments by the time the Headmaster arrived and warded the hall against eavesdroppers and locked the doors. As he made his way to the head of the Ravenclaw table they were using for the

meeting, those Order members not already seated scrambled for the benches.

Gazing down the length of the table, Dumbledore noted that the Weasley clan was in attendance, minus Ron, Ginny and Percy, of course. Dung was explaining his latest scheme to several people, many of whom looked upon him with various degrees of disgust. Few people understood why Dumbledore put up with the drunken thief, but Dumbledore found him amusing and surprisingly useful at times.

Albus leaned away from the table slightly as a house elf served him tea. Once the creature moved away, he called the meeting to order. The sounds of shuffling echoed through the room and the elves in the hall popped away.

"Much has happened and I know many of you have questions about the events of the last few days," Dumbledore began.

"Headmaster, is it true that Potter's relatives locked him away this summer?" Minerva asked, her face pinched in outrage over the idea.

"Aye, it's true," Moody growled from his position across from her.

"And he has been removed from their care for the summer," Dumbledore soothed. "I've spoken to them about their treatment of the boy and am positive it won't be repeated next year."

"You're going to send him back there?" Remus asked, aghast at the idea.

"The blood wards," Dumbledore began.

"Are not worth the abuse!" the werewolf railed. Moody looked at him oddly as Remus leaned forward to glare at Dumbledore. "Harry could stay at Order Headquarters next year. Surely the house is safe enough, hidden as it is."

"Assuming the brat ever comes out," Snape snarled.

Several people turned to glare at him.

"You've always disliked him, Severus," Molly said, shaking her head. "I don't think we need a repeat of your opinions on the matter."

"With reason!" the dark man fumed. "You saw what he'd done to me after he removed us from Headquarters."

The Weasley twins, sitting several spots away and on the opposite side of the table from their former Potions Professor, both grinned. They'd heard their mother explain to their father what had happened yesterday at Headquarters and regretted not witnessing it first hand. Not that they wanted to be chunked out of the house on their arses, but a few pictures of the glorious downfall of the arrogant prick would not have gone amiss. Not only would it have been amusing, but the blackmail potential was enormous!

"Save it," Moody said, glaring at the man. "We've all heard this whine before."

"But you saw what he did to me," Snape complained bitterly.

"And about damn time, too," Remus said fiercely. "What should he have done after putting up with years of abuse from you?"

"He should show respect for a teacher!"

"Respect is earned, you great, greasy git!" Remus bellowed, glaring dangerously at the man. "And you are the least likely person to have earned it from him. You hated him before you ever met him because of who his father was. You thought he was a pampered prince, yet when confronted with the truth of Harry's life at the Dursley's, you still couldn't admit that you were wrong!"

"If he's not the spoiled brat I think he is, why are we holding a meeting about him?" Snape asked snidely.

"Because he bested you, Death Eater," Moody growled, his eye whirly madly. "He bested all of you who were in the house. You let your guards down and got your asses handed to you."

"Yeah, and some help you were with that," Tonks grumbled.

Moody turned to her and raised an eyebrow. "If you don't want to be seen as a little girl playing at being an Auror, you'll remember to be constantly vigilant!"

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, Moody! Not that tired old refrain again," Tonks complained. She wasn't as calm as she sounded, however. Her hair was cycling through too many colors to name. His barb had obviously stuck a sore spot.

"Had you used what little intelligence you have, you would have asked me to have a peek at what was going on upstairs," Moody said. Then he looked at each individual who'd been in Grimmauld that day. "You all got exactly what you deserved. Your treatment of that boy has been appalling and you're all very lucky he was as gentle with you as he was!"

"He snapped our wands!" Emmeline Vance protested.

"And they've since been replaced," Remus reminded her. "Alastor is right. Harry could have been much harsher with us than he was, and we would have deserved it."

"I don't think I'd go that far," Dumbledore said gently, his eyes shining.

"Of course you wouldn't," Moody growled, looking at the man.

Ignoring him, Dumbledore smiled. "But we are getting off track. This meeting was called to come up with ideas to remove Harry from Headquarters and return the house to the Order."

"And how do you expect to do that?" Moody asked.

"It's not as if he's going to invite us in for a cup of tea and a nice chat, Headmaster," Hestia Jones muttered.

"True," Dumbledore agreed, leaning forward. "But while he is angry with us, we know he'd never hurt his friends."

Arthur Weasley frowned. "You propose sending in Ron and Hermione?"

Molly paled slightly and turned to face Dumbledore.

"Yes," Albus confirmed.

"Is that wise, Headmaster?" Snape asked. "The Granger chit might be useful, I'll grant. But that lout, Weasley, has a worse temper than Potter and isn't nearly as intelligent."

As the Weasley family erupted in defense of one of their own, Snape sat back and idly swirled the tea around in his cup. Whatever their strengths, the family of redheads was easily riled and the dark man greatly enjoyed manipulating them.

"Enough!" Dumbledore shouted, gaining control once again. "Ronald Weasley is a true and loyal friend. I have no doubt he would do all in his power to help Harry."

"How very Gryffindor," Snape snarked.

Minerva scowled, but refused to rise to the bait. "Tell me, Severus. How many in your house have become Death Eaters since you became Head of Slytherin?" she asked casually.

Snape leaned forward and glared at her. "Why you -"

"I wouldn't finish that sentence," Minerva told him, her eyes boring into his. "Unless, of course, you wish to spend what's left of your life as a toad!"

"He'd be the perfect mate for Umbridge," George Weasley murmured.

"And a friend for Trevor," Fred added.

The Weasley family broke into laughter, and Snape flushed.

"Again, we have gotten off track. Ron and Hermione will be sent to Headquarters with instructions to talk Harry into coming out and releasing the house to the Order. Sirius would have wanted it that way and Harry must know that."

Several Order members nodded in agreement.

Remus shook his head. "Harry's right. You are an idiot."

Several people gasped and Moody's eyes widened so far his fake one nearly popped out of his head.

"What did you say?" Dumbledore asked mildly.

Pushing away from the table, Remus stood up and glared down at the Headmaster. "I said you're an idiot, Albus. I don't think you or the others truly realize the depths of Harry's anger towards you...all of you!"

"It's not as if we knew what was going on, Remus," Tonks reminded him. "Once he's aware of that and has a bit of time to cool off, I'm sure he'll see that and forgive us."

"Dumbledore knew," Remus told the crowd. "Didn't you, old man?"

"There is much that could not have been avoided, that is true," Albus began.

"I call bullshit," Fred said, standing. His parents looked at him in shock, but his brothers all nodded in agreement. "Ron, George and I told you what took place the summer after Harry's first year. We told you about having to pull the bars off Harry's window and about how he'd been locked in his room and not fed enough."

George stood up and glared at Dumbledore. "And we believed you when you said you'd take care of the problem. But you didn't, did you?"

Minerva turned to face the Headmaster. "Albus, is this true? Tell me you spoke to those horrible muggles about their behavior!"

"Harry's home life may not have been ideal," Dumbledore began, choosing his words carefully. "But I did my best to ensure that his time at Hogwarts made up for any unpleasantness he may have experienced over the summer."

"Oh, right. I'm sure after a summer of dealing with his relatives, a nice fight with the Dark Lord must seem like an amusing vacation!" Remus exclaimed, throwing up his hands in frustration. Spinning to face the others in the room, he glared at them all. "Harry's faced the Dark Lord six times and lived. How many of us can say that? As

Harry pointed out to me, we piss ourselves at the mere mention of his name. Oh, yes, Hogwarts has been a real safe haven for him, hasn't it?"

"He witnessed his godfather's murder some weeks ago," Moody said as he climbed to his feet. "How many of you have checked on him since then? Oh, that's right. Albus wouldn't allow it, would he? It's so much better to let a teenager wallow in guilt and grief, isn't it?"

Molly's eyes widened as she looked at her husband. "Oh, Merlin, he must have felt so alone. What have we done, Arthur?"

"The same thing we've all done," Minerva said quietly. Turning, she looked at Dumbledore. "All of us."

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Albus sighed wearily. "I agree with most of what has been said here. But we can do nothing to help rectify the situation until we gain access to Harry. We will begin with his friends. I will speak to Ron and Hermione about the situation and what is needed."

"They need the truth, Headmaster," Remus told him. "You cannot send them to Headquarters unaware of what Harry's been through or they won't understand his anger."

"They will be given the information they need to help us deal with the situation," Dumbledore said as he stood up.

Moody's eyes narrowed, noting that the old man hadn't actually agreed with Remus.

"Let us adjourn for now. I will keep you all updated on our progress," Dumbledore told them as he released the wards on the door.

As the Order members exited the hall, Moody held Remus back. "My house, Lupin. We need to talk."

Nodding, the werewolf strode from the room.

Later, at the Burrow...

Dumbledore took a deep breath of the clean air as he walked towards the Quidditch pitch, Ron and Hermione in tow. He'd had a

difficult time convincing Molly and Arthur to let him speak to the children alone. Molly was too emotional at the moment and would not have helped the situation.

Reaching the pitch, he turned to face the teenagers and cast a silencing charm around them. "I'm sure you're both wondering why I've asked to speak with you."

"Is it about Harry?" Hermione asked.

Dumbledore smiled. "It is, indeed, Miss Granger."

"Is he all right?" Ron asked worriedly. When the Headmaster looked at him curiously, he scowled. "It's not like we've spoken to him since we left the train station. You wouldn't let us."

"Ron!" Hermione hissed.

Dumbledore sighed sadly. "I'm afraid Mr Weasley's anger is justified, Miss Granger. I've recently come to regret my decision to allow Harry his privacy during his time of grief. He should have been amongst friends, or at least been able to contact them via owl post."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "What's happened?"

"The Dursley's did not treat him well when he arrived home. Once I'd been informed of the situation, I went to visit Harry and found him to be very angry with me, with some justification, I'll admit. Seeing the conditions he was living in with his relatives, I made the decision to move him to Headquarters."

"That should have made him happy. He hates those bloody muggles," Ron muttered.

"Headquarters would be the last place he'd want to go, though," Hermione said, watching the Headmaster. "There are too many memories of Sirius there."

"I didn't think of that," Ron said with a frown.

"Neither, in fact, did I. It's true Harry didn't want to go to Headquarters, but I'm afraid I forced the issue," Dumbledore said sadly.

"Oh, Headmaster," Hermione said, shaking her head. "He must be so angry!"

"Indeed," Dumbledore agreed. "He has, in fact, expressed his displeasure with me by evicting the Order from the house."

"But how?" Ron asked, confused.

"He must have inherited the house from Sirius," Hermione told him.

"Correct, Miss Granger. The Order is not allowed to enter the house, as Harry has ordered Kreacher to change the wards."

Hermione frowned and tried to say something, then shook her head. "The Fidelius charm is still in place, though. I can't say the house address."

"Kreacher was unable to remove it," Dumbledore confirmed. "All of the other wards have been changed, however."

"Wait a minute," Ron said suddenly. "Harry kicked you all out and now he's in the house alone...with Kreacher?"

"Oh, God, just like Sirius," Hermione blurted out.

"That bloody elf could do anything to him!" Ron said, angrily.

"Kreacher has no choice but to obey Harry, Mr Weasley. He's bound to him now," Dumbledore soothed.

"That didn't help Sirius," Hermione reminded him.

"I think we can all agree that Harry is more careful than Sirius was," Dumbledore said lightly.

The two teenagers looked at each other. Hermione nibbled on her thumbnail and Ron scowled.

"Maybe," Hermione hedged. "But it doesn't really matter. Harry can't be left there alone."

"I agree. That's why I asked to speak to you both. Harry won't let the Order in, but I'm betting he wouldn't turn either of you away," Dumbledore told them seriously. "I am hoping that, once you've gained entry into the house, you can help Harry. He cannot stay at Headquarters alone."

Ron snorted. "Better there, than back with those filthy relatives of his."

"He's right," Hermione agreed as she stared at the Headmaster. "As much as I don't like the idea of Harry being alone, he can't go back to the Dursley's."

"No, he can't. Not until I've straightened things out with them, in any case. No, he will be staying here with the Weasley's. The warding around the Burrow will be increased and a round the clock guard set."

"What do you think, Hermione?" Ron asked.

She shrugged. "He likes being here. And it's certainly better than leaving him alone." She bit her bottom lip for a moment, then looked up at Dumbledore. "But we won't force him," she stated. "If he doesn't want to leave Headquarters, we will respect his decision. Right, Ron?"

"Right. People have been pulling him into their schemes long enough," Ron said, shaking his head. "It's about time he makes his own choices."

Hermione looked at him approvingly and Dumbledore smiled.

"Harry is lucky to have such fiercely loyal friends," he told them both.

"You're wrong, Headmaster," Hermione told him quietly. "We're the lucky ones."

"Even if it has taken some of us longer to realize that," Ron said ruefully.

Grimmauld Place, evening...

Moody closed the front door quietly, not wanting to disturb the portrait of Mrs. Black. The bag he'd thrown over his shoulder just before leaving his house was awkward, and he dropped it to the floor with some relief.

His magical eye spun around wildly as he examined the house for danger. Seeing only the elf in the kitchen and Harry in the library, he sighed. Patting the pockets of his overcoat, he checked to make sure he'd lost none of the other treasures he'd brought the young man.

A loud pop sounded through the entrance hall and Moody looked up, scowling. "What do you want?"

Kreacher scowled back. "Nasty, half-blood master knows you're here."

"Good. Take that bag into the library."

"Kreacher doesn't have to listen to you," the elf hissed.

"No, but you have to listen to me," Harry said as he walked into the hall. "Now, take Mr. Moody's bag into the library. And don't look at or touch anything inside of it!"

"Kreacher will do as filthy, muggle-loving master commands," he grumbled as he picked up the bag in question.

When the elf left, Harry stared at the old man in front of him. "I didn't expect to see you so soon."

Moody shrugged. "We don't have a lot of time, Potter, and some things have happened that you should be made aware of."

"Library or kitchen?" Harry asked.

"Library."

"After you," Harry said, waving the older man ahead of him.

Moody's eyes gleamed. "Smart, Potter. I always knew there was something different about you."

As the old man passed him, Harry frowned and rubbed his scar.

"I'm not talking about that, boy," Moody snapped, his eye having seen Harry's actions. "Unlike your friends, you don't trust someone simply because he says he's on your side. You're cautious, and that'll serve you well."

Harry's expression hardened as he entered the library. "A lesson I learned too late for some. And don't call me boy."

Spotting the bag the elf had brought into the room and placed on a table, Moody walked toward it, shaking his head. "True enough, Potter. But we all make mistakes. The smartest of us learn from them and move on. The dumb ones either wallow in guilt or never learn. Which will you be, I wonder?"

Unhooking the clasp that sealed the bag, he flipped it open and waved the young man over. "These are for you."

Joining him at the table, Harry examined the contents of the bag. Inside were many books, some so old and worn they looked as though they'd fall apart if touched. Reaching down, he gently removed one volume from the bag. He turned it over gently in his hands to read the title – Dark Lords: Unstoppable Creatures of Evil or Playground Bullies? - then looked up at Moody questioningly.

"It's an old, out of print book, like most of the others in the bag," the old man told him, his eye spinning lazily in its socket, "but you should read it. Most evil men, whether they call themselves a Dark Lord, a General or a Chancellor, thrive on misinformation. Take Voldemort, for example. Most people think he's immortal, unbeatable. He's not. He's human, Potter, with all the limitations and frailties we all have. It's just a matter of finding his weakness and using it against him."

"What if he doesn't have one?" Harry asked.

"We all have weaknesses, Potter. All of us. For you, it's only a matter of educating yourself, training, and finding his before he finds yours."

"You make it sound so simple."

"Death is simple, Harry," Moody told him firmly. "Living is the hard part. If you're not up for the challenge, tell me before I waste my time on you. I don't want to discover that you don't have the balls to kill the bastard when the time comes."

"But I don't want to be a murderer!" Harry exclaimed, glaring.

"Is it murder or self defense, Potter? You know as well as I that Voldemort would kill you in a heartbeat, if given the chance! Will you lay down your wand and die at his feet like a dog, or fight to live your life?"

When Harry only gaped at him, Moody shook his head in disgust. "You made a small step in the right direction when you kicked the Order out of this place. Was it all a bluff? Will you go crawling back to Dumbledore and hide behind his robes for protection?"

"Fuck off, Moody," Harry bellowed. "You know nothing of my life or what I've been through, so don't lecture me!"

"Oh, I just love angsty, teenage bullshit in the afternoon. And keep your voice down or the hag in the hall will be giving us headaches with her shrieking."

"Hag in the hall? You mean Mrs Black?"

"Who else, Potter?"

Harry started at him for a moment, his eyes wide with disbelief. "So much for constant vigilance," he said, choking back his laughter.

"What are you talking about?" Moody growled.

"You," Harry said, trying not to laugh. "You walked in and didn't notice? The great Alastor Moody? The man who takes paranoia to new extremes? Oh, this is too rich."

"Potter," the old man growled warningly.

Shaking his head, Harry waved a hand toward the hall. "Look for yourself, Moody."

Scowling, Alastor scanned the entrance hall with his magical eye, then muttered an oath. "You removed it? How? We tried everything."

"I ordered Kreacher to remove it," Harry told him, trying to keep his expression serious. "And you didn't notice." He bit his lip as he watched the older man mutter to himself. "That doesn't inspire much faith in your teaching abilities, Moody."

The heated glare the old man shot him was the last straw. Sliding into one of the chairs at the table, Harry gave up and laughed out loud.

"It's not that funny," Moody grouched. "But it does prove that even I make mistakes. This one might have been harmless, but the next one might be my last."

"Next one?" Harry asked, still grinning.

"I told you, Potter, we all make mistakes. They're as unavoidable as the dawn. Being constantly vigilant can cut down on how many you make, but you'll still slip. Accept that fact now and you'll save yourself a lot of heartache in the future."

Shaking his head, Harry could only smile at how neatly the man had proven his earlier point. "I understand, Professor, and I'll do my best."

"See that you do," Moody grumbled. "And don't call me that!"

"Yes, sir," Harry replied.

"Don't call me that, either. It's Alastor, Mad-Eye, or Moody." Reaching into the bag, he began to pull out books and stack them on the table. "These are just basic books on subjects I felt you might want to familiarize yourself with. They'll make a good foundation for later training."

Harry nodded as he scanned the titles.

"Read them as quickly as you can. Your education has been sorely lacking and we don't have a lot of time. There are some people I want to talk to about furthering your training, but I wanted to get you started on these first."

"I'm giving you a few other things, as well," Moody continued as he pulled items out of several pockets. "The first is a foe glass. While I doubt you'll need it here in the house, you should familiarize yourself with it. When term starts, make sure to take it with you and place it in your dorm room."

"You think I'll need it at Hogwarts?" Harry asked as he examined the object on the table. It looked like a mirror, but didn't reflect anything in the surrounding room. The surface was foggy, but through the mist a figure loomed, too indistinct to make out clearly.

Moody snorted. "How many times have you run into trouble in that place? And not just with Voldemort!"

"True," Harry coincided.

"You know how it works?"

"Yes, I think so. It reflects the image of the owner's enemy."

"Or enemies," Moody added. "The images will remain blurry and out of focus if your enemy is far away. The more in focus the figure is, the closer they are to you, so watch yourself!"

"Got it. But shouldn't I be watching the mirror?" The glare that followed his comment made him grin.

"Smart ass," Moody grumbled. "Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to move on."

"By all means," Harry said, waving a hand airily.

Shaking his head, Moody touched another object on the table. "This is a presentation pensieve and works differently than the pensieve Dumbledore has in his office. You deposit memories in the bowl the same way, but rather than entering the memory, you tap the pensieve with your wand three times and the memory is displayed, much like a muggle movie. This type of pensieve is used to train aurors, or was, until Fudge was elected."

"Why would Fudge care how aurors are trained?" Harry asked curiously.

"The Death Eaters own him, Potter, and no Death Eater wants to deal with an effective police force."

"Malfoy," Harry spat.

"Very good. Yes, Lucius Malfoy is Voldemort's mole. He controls Fudge and, therefore, the Ministry. I went back through the records and was able to pinpoint exactly when Fudge began taking bribes, based solely on department cutbacks. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement was the first to feel the cuts."

"If it's in the records, why didn't you bring it the attention of the Wizengamot?"

"I did," Moody growled. "Took it straight to Dumbledore, in fact."

Harry groaned. "I think I can guess what happened."

"I'm sure you can," Moody said with a feral smile. "The old man said he'd take care of it. Soon after, the records disappeared and I was politely asked to retire. I confronted Dumbledore about it, of course. He told me some tale about Fudge threatening him with Ministry interference at Hogwarts if he didn't back down. I didn't believe him at the time, but after last year, I think he might have been telling me the truth."

Harry cocked his head, thinking quickly. "You may have a point."

"Dumbledore does tell the truth occasionally, Potter. The trick is separating out the lies before they bite you on the ass. He's a big picture kind of person. His problem is that he often forgets that the picture he's looking at represents people, not pawns."

"Don't defend him to me, Moody."

"I'm not. Albus has his faults and he's made a lot of mistakes in his life, especially with you. But he's also done a lot of good in this world. You may not ever get along with him again, but don't let your anger blind you. If Albus pulls his head out of his ass in regards to you, he can help you. Just don't close your mind to that possibility or you'll be limiting yourself out of spite."

"So you think I should just forget everything he's done to me and trust him?" Harry asked angrily.

"I didn't say anything about trusting or forgetting, Potter. I'm talking about learning."

"Forget it, Moody. That man has manipulated me for the last time." When Alastor tried to reply, Harry held up one hand. "I'd suggest you change the subject or leave," he growled.

Shaking his head and grumbling under his breath, Moody sat down across the table from Harry and pulled out his flask. Uncorking it, he drank deeply. "Fine then, changing the subject." He corked the flask with a slap and dumped it on the table. "The Order met at Hogwarts today. You can guess what the topic was, I'm sure."

"Me, and the fact that they have no secure place to meet any longer?"

"Aye, that would be it. Now, I could tell you all about it, but I'll save my breath." Reaching out a hand, he snagged the presentation pensieve with a finger and dragged it toward him. When he pulled his wand, he noted Harry's suddenly stiff posture and nodded to himself. The lad was watching him carefully and Moody was glad to see it.

Lifting his wand to his head, he paused a moment and brought forth the memory of the meeting. Once it was in place, he used his wand to extract it, flicking it into the pensieve with an ease of long practice.

"Activate the pensieve, Potter. Tap the rim three times with your wand," Moody instructed, tucking away his wand.

When Harry lifted his hand from below the table, Moody was heartened to discover he already held his wand.

The pensieve rang like a bell each time the rim was struck. As the third bell like tone rang out, the memory appeared above the bowl and began to play.

Once the memory had played itself out, Harry sat back in thought. He was surprised by some of what he heard, though he was glad to hear the Weasley twins tearing into Dumbledore. He didn't

understand Remus, though. The last time they'd spoken, he'd defended the Headmaster. At the meeting, he'd called the man an idiot. It didn't make sense.

"What has you scowling now, Potter?" Moody asked as he replaced the memory and pushed the pensieve away.

"Remus. The last time I spoke to him, he argued Dumbledore's case. Or tried to, at any rate."

"So?"

"So why the change of heart, Moody?" Harry asked. "He was more than willing to do whatever Dumbledore asked of him, then suddenly he's calling him an idiot?"

"He realized he made a mistake," the older man said, shrugging. "He came back to my place after the meeting and helped me choose which books to bring you. He's angry at himself for believing in Dumbledore so completely. He's angry at himself for not watching out for you. He told me you wrote something in a notebook and showed it to him? And that he discussed it with you later?" When Harry nodded, Moody sighed. "He said he didn't want to believe what you'd told him. Once you'd evicted the Order, however, he started looking at its members with new eyes."

"Are you saying he believes me now?"

"Aye, and the guilt of ever doubting you is eating at him."

"He made his choice," Harry bit out.

"Seems to me he's made a different choice now."

When Harry only glared, Moody stood up and sighed. "There's a difference between being strong and being hard, Potter. With strength comes resilience. Become too hard and you'll crack and shatter at the first knock you take."

Harry stood up when Moody walked toward the door. "Wait. You're leaving now? What about Hermione and Ron?"

"Albus was going to talk to them, but I don't know when. Read those books, Potter. I've got people to talk to and a few more items I need to find for you."

Grimmauld Place, Mid-Morning...

Harry finished washing his breakfast dishes and dried his hands. As he watched the water drain from the sink, he made a mental note to look up common household charms. Since the Ministry couldn't track his use of magic in the house, he could see no reason to continue doing things the hard way. He knew he could order Kreacher to do the cleaning, but he wanted as little contact with the elf as possible.

As he walked out of the kitchen, making sure to keep the table between him and the refrigerator, he made a list of the things he wanted to accomplish. He still had several of the books Moody had given him to read. Most of them were small, but contained useful information, and he'd stayed up later than he'd expected reading through them. He also had some of the books he'd pilfered from the library to read yet, but knew they would take some time to get through. As Moody had stressed that time was short and seemed to think the books he'd brought were important, Harry figured he finish them first, before starting on the others.

Making his way to the library, he sat down at the table and pulled a book toward him. He'd started it last night, but hadn't been able to finish it. Finding the piece of parchment he'd used as a bookmark, he opened the book carefully. The pages were brittle and smudged in places, but the information was interesting. Harry was almost certain it was a muggle volume, but the topic of clearing the mind for meditation and relaxation could be useful in Occlumency. It was certainly more informative than anything Snape had ever taught him.

Several pages later, a loud popping sound had him raising his head to stare at the scowling house elf beside him.

"What?" he asked in annoyance.

"Filthy, nasty master has visitors," Kreacher grumbled.

"How?" he asked. "No one's allowed in the house." Marking his place, he set his book aside and stood up.

"The visitors are on the lawn," the elf told him, grinning maliciously. "The muggle-loving, hairy Headmaster did try the door, though."

Harry's smile nearly matched the elf's. "With the same results, I'm assuming."

Kreacher cackled. "He left a wonderful furrow in the weeds out front when he landed and skidded to a halt." He danced a small jig, then looked up at Harry with a touch of respect. "Kreacher could almost like his new master, if he weren't such a filthy, nasty, little half blood!"

"And the less I see of you, the more I think I could actually like you, if you weren't a demented, twisted little thing," Harry said, turning away from the elf and walking toward the door.

Kreacher scowled for a moment, trying to work that out. Then, seeing that Harry was leaving, he trotted after him. "Kreacher has prepared the upstairs window, for master," he added, puffing slightly as he tried to keep up.

"Thank you, Kreacher. Nicely done," Harry complimented as he turned and moved quickly up the staircase.

Kreacher frowned. Had his new master just thanked him for doing his duty? Shaking his head, unable to puzzle out the young human, he followed up the stairs, though more slowly.

Entering the front bedroom, Harry saw that the old drapes had been pulled back and the window opened. He wasn't sure why Kreacher was being so helpful, but figured it was a puzzle for another time. Just now, he was curious about his visitors.

Standing at the corner of the window, he looked down at the front lawn. There, in front of the house, was Dumbledore, looking rather rumpled and annoyed. He still had twigs in his beard and dirt on his robe. Not far from him stood Tonks, frowning at the house, and Moody, who was laughing like a loon at the disgruntled Headmaster.

Off to the left, looking confused and a bit uncertain, were Ron and Hermione. Behind them stood a very concerned looking Molly Weasley.

"I'm still not sure this is such a good idea, Albus," Molly was saying. She kept glancing at the house, then back the Headmaster.

"Be easy, Molly. Harry won't harm them," Dumbledore said as he brushed at his robe.

"Unless they try to harm him," Moody added, squinting at the students.

"Why would we want to harm him?" Hermione asked, shocked at the thought.

"That would depend on what this fool has filled your minds with," Moody replied, jerking a thumb at Dumbledore.

"Alastor, please. You're not helping the situation," Albus said with some heat.

Ron shrugged. "He didn't tell us a lot and I doubt it was the whole truth."

"Ron!" Hermione hissed.

Dumbledore looked a bit hurt by the statement, but Moody smiled.

"Ronald Weasley! You will apologize!" Molly demanded.

"For what? Honestly, Mum, when was the last time any of you told us the whole truth? Oh, you say it's for our own good, and I'm sure you believe that. But being kept in the dark has caused the three of us more trouble than knowing the truth would have."

Into the silence that followed, Hermione nodded her head, though reluctantly. "I'm sure he didn't mean to sound so disrespectful, but he's right."

When Molly began to sputter in outrage, Ron looked at Hermione, a bit surprised that she'd backed him up.

"You could have been a bit more diplomatic about it, but I meant what I said. You're right," she told him quietly.

"Thanks," he said, then turned to Moody. "Look, neither of us wants to hurt Harry, but I think we can both understand why he's being cautious." Walking toward the man, he drew his wand and held it out carefully. "Take it. I won't need it with Harry."

Hermione joined him a moment later and surrendered her wand. "We wouldn't hurt him," she told the man quietly.

Ignoring the wands, Alastor looked at the house, specifically the upstairs bedroom, and waited. In response to something only he could see, he turned back to the two teens and shook his head. "That won't be necessary."

"Why?" Hermione asked.

In response, the house shook rather violently and everyone but Moody took a few steps back in fear.

"I think you'll find that the house is open to you now," Alastor said quietly. "But Harry isn't without his defenses, so don't betray the trust he's just given you."

"Excellent," Dumbledore exclaimed, walking toward the house. "Maybe now we can get this all settled."

"Just them, you hairy old goat," Harry called, stepping up to the window and finally making himself visible to those on the lawn. "Only Ron and Hermione may enter."

"Now, Harry," Dumbledore began.

The window crashed down and the drapes swung closed.

Dumbledore sighed and turned back to the teens. "Well, then, I guess it's up to you both. Bring him out if you can."

"We'll do whatever we can to make Harry happy," Hermione said firmly, tucking her wand away. Turning and walking toward the front door, she didn't notice the Headmaster's scowl, but Ron did.

Catching up to walk beside her, he chuckled. "I think you managed to annoy him."

"I'm more concerned about Harry than the Headmaster," she muttered.

"So am I. But let me enjoy the moment, won't you?" Ron pleaded as he put his wand in his pocket.

Shaking her head, she stopped and reached for the door handle. "Let's hope I don't get a face full of dirt and weeds for this."

Taking a deep breath, she turned the handle and the door swung open with a squeak. Glancing at Ron, who shrugged, she then straightened her shoulders and walked into the gloomy interior.

Ron followed, closing the door behind him.

"Welcome to the former headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix," a raspy voice said from the top of the stairs.

Ron and Hermione both jumped and spun toward the voice.

"Sorry," Harry said as he walked down the stairs, "I couldn't resist."

Hermione slapped a hand over her heart and frowned at him. "That wasn't nice, Harry."

"Maybe not, but I won't have been able to resist either," Ron said, grinning. "Come on, Hermione, lighten up a bit." He faced Harry and looked him over carefully. "Living on your own seems to be good for you. I can't say much about the house, but I could get to like the whole 'no adults' thing."

"The house has its benefits," Harry said, shrugging. "But I'll get into that later." He smiled at Hermione. "I'm sorry for scaring you."

"Prat," she muttered. Then her eyes widened and she looked at the landing. "Wait a minute. Where's Mrs Black's portrait?"

Harry laughed. "You're quicker than Moody. I had to point it out to him."

Ron, staring at the now bare wall, grinned. "It's certainly an improvement."

"I may have gotten rid of the old harridan, but I've still got an evil house elf to deal with. There's also a rather nasty beast that's taken up residence in my refrigerator."

"What?" Hermione asked, confused.

Harry waved away her question. "We'll get to that later. What I'd like to know is why you're both here. I've been told that Dumbledore felt being here was too dangerous for you."

"We're supposed to talk you into coming out of the house and returning it to the Order," Ron said cheerfully.

"We really need to work on your tact, Ronald," Hermione groused.

"I don't need tact, Hermione, I need the truth," Harry told her quietly.

"That is the truth, though I wouldn't have been as blunt about it," she said, still frowning at Ron.

Ron rolled his eyes. "He's not an idiot, Hermione. We're here for him, not them," he said, nodding toward the front door. "Let's just give it to him straight and let him make up his own mind for a change."

Hermione sighed, but nodded. Ron would never be a great orator, but he was correct.

Looking between the two, Harry shook his head. "Mind telling me when you two changed roles?"

"We haven't," Ron said seriously. "After our little frolic through the Department of Mysteries, I did a lot of thinking. It wasn't as if I had a choice, really. Those brain things sort of rifled through my memories. But I guess they did me a favor." His eyes met Harry's. "I've been a real prat from time to time. We've always managed to work things out, but that doesn't excuse what I've done. I know I've got a lot of hangups – being the youngest son, being poor – but that's no reason to take it out on my best friend."

Hermione widened her eyes and blinked. "Never tell me that Ronald Weasley has gone and grown up on us!" She placed a hand over her heart. "I think I might faint from shock!" When Ron glared at her, she grinned. "Oh, lighten up, Ron."

Harry's lips twitched. "Don't you hate it when someone throws your words back at you?"

"Yeah," Ron grumbled, still glaring at Hermione. When he turned back to Harry, he shrugged. "I just needed to say that. I know that you trust Hermione. She's always been there for you when you needed her. But even after everything I've done, you still trusted me enough to let me in to the house. It means a lot, Harry."

"You and Hermione were always there when I needed you the most," Harry said, looking between them. "Although, if we're going for total honesty, I have to admit that when you both tried to give your wands to Moody, it sort of sealed the deal. I'd been debating with myself about letting you in before that. I wasn't sure what Dumbledore had told you, or if I could trust you."

Ron winced slightly and rubbed his ear. "I think I understand what Hermione was saying about tact, now."

"Brutal honesty has it's place," Hermione said.

"Yeah, I suppose. And with the way things are now, it's probably for the best," Ron added. "Harry, what's going on? This whole situation is rather confusing."

Raking a hand through his hair, Harry sighed. "I know, and I'm not sure how to explain it."

"Over a cup of tea, preferably," Hermione said, heading for the stairs to the kitchen.

"I'll be down in minute. I need to grab something from my bedroom. Oh, and don't open the refrigerator!" he called after her.

"What's wrong with it?" Ron asked, puzzled.

"I'll explain later," Harry replied, walking up the steps.

Shrugging, Ron followed Hermione to the kitchen.

Walking into the kitchen a few minutes later, Harry found his friends sitting as far away from the refrigerator as possible and staring at it with some alarm.

"You didn't open it, did you?" he asked.

"No, but it growled at me when I walked by it to make tea," Hermione said, never taking her eyes off the appliance.

"What's in there?" Ron asked.

"I've no idea. I was looking for something to eat my first morning here and made the mistake of opening the door. I don't know what it is, but it blinked at me."

"It blinked?" Hermione asked, alarmed.

"Yeah, and whatever it is has more than two eyes."

Ron shuddered. "Why don't you just get rid of it?"

"I was thinking of sending it to Hagrid, but haven't worked out the logistics of it yet," Harry told them as he sat down, taking the chair closest to the door, and placed his notebook on the table.

"Why not just let Kreacher take it?" Hermione asked, still staring at the refrigerator.

"I don't want him leaving the house."

"That's probably a smart idea, but I'm not sure I'd want that elf near me for any length of time," Ron commented.

"That's one of the things everyone's worried about, Harry," Hermione told him, finally looking at him. "The Order is concerned about you being here alone with Kreacher."

"He's not so bad, really. I rarely see him. The few times I've told him to do something, he's done it, but only because he has to. He can't leave or speak to anyone outside the house unless I give him orders to do so."

"Dumbledore was right about that part, at least. He said you'd be careful with Kreacher," Hermione said quietly.

"Actually, Dumbledore said we could all agree that he would be more careful than Sirius," Ron corrected. When he saw Harry's face tighten with anger, he held up a hand. "I didn't say either of us agreed with him, though. Blunt honesty, Harry. Remember?"

"Ron's right," Hermione added. "It's probably the best way to work through this. Ron and I have no idea what's happened. Dumbledore told us we weren't allowed to contact you this summer. Then, yesterday, he showed up at the Burrow and told us that you'd kicked the Order out of the house and wouldn't allow any of them back in. He hoped you'd let the two of us in and that we'd be able to talk you out. Ron and I made it perfectly clear that we wouldn't force you to do anything and that the choice had to be yours."

"I wouldn't blame you if you didn't want to leave. A summer without adults ordering one about sounds like a fine thing to me," Ron added.

"Ron!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Would you stop that?" Ron asked, glaring at her. "Look, I don't know what's going on any more than you do. Harry will either tell us or he won't. But even you have to admit that being here, with no relatives to starve him or treat him like a dog, no Order members about to pull his strings and make him dance to a tune he can't even hear, has got to be an improvement. With the house under the Fidelius charm, it's the safest place he could possibly be."

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. "I agree with most of what you said, but there are still problems that need to be dealt with."

"Such as?" Ron asked, leaning toward her.

"Food, for one," Hermione replied. "The minute he steps out of the house, the Order will grab him."

Ron shrugged. "He can send Kreacher."

"Would you eat anything that elf brought back?" she snapped.

Ron sagged on his chair. "You've got a point," he muttered.

"Are you two finished?" Harry asked, amused.

"What?" Ron asked. "Oh, sorry. Forgot you were there."

"Thanks," Harry said, rolling his eyes. "Yes, Hermione, I know there are still some problems that I need to work out, but food isn't one of them. And yes, I'll get around to that, too," he added when she tried to interrupt. Then he slid his notebook down the table to them. "To start, read that. Most of the early pages you can just skim through. You both know all that. It's the last part of the notebook that will help explain things, I think."

"What is this?" Hermione asked, opening it.

"My life story?" When they both looked at him oddly, he sighed. "Just read it, please?"

"Great, my best friend's giving me homework now," Ron muttered as he moved his chair closer to Hermione's so he could read along with her.

"I'll be in the library when you're done," Harry told them as he stood up.

Hermione, turning a page, didn't reply. Ron grunted and waved a hand at him as he read over Hermione's shoulder.

Walking out of the kitchen, he almost smiled. Hermione's rudeness didn't surprise him much. Give her a book, any book, and it was impossible to get anything coherent out of her until she'd finished it.

Returning to the library, he sat down at the table and opened the book he'd been reading earlier. If he was lucky, he might be able to get through the current chapter before his friends finished.

He was jolted out of his book sometime later when several loud shrieks, followed by a bellow, echoed through the house. Jumping to his feet, he drew his wand, then nearly blasted Kreacher to smithereens when the elf popped in, grinning horribly.

"Don't do that!" Harry yelled, staring at the elf. "And what's with all the shouting?"

Kreacher scowled up at him. "I don't know what nasty master is shouting about, but master's friends opened the refrigerator."

"Oh, God, are they hurt?" he asked, rushing toward the door.

"No," Kreacher said, his disappointment obvious. "But maybe next time."

Stepping out the door, Harry was nearly run over by Ron.

"Harry!" Ron exclaimed as he jumped back and crashed into Hermione.

When Hermione hit the floor, Harry shoved Ron out of his way and went to check on her. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she said, glaring at Ron.

"Sorry," Ron mumbled, looking sheepish. "I didn't know you were behind me."

"Did you expect me to stay in the kitchen?" she asked in disbelief.

"I don't know what I expected," he said, throwing his hands in the air. "With all the growling, screaming and hairy tentacles, I just wanted to get out of there."

Standing with Harry's help, she crossed her arms and tapped a foot. "You were the one doing all the screaming."

"Yeah, well, you would have screamed too, if you'd seen it," Ron mumbled.

"And the bellow?" Harry asked.

"That was me. I was telling the red-headed genius to close the refrigerator door before the thing crawled out," Hermione said.

Blushing furiously, Ron looked at his feet. "Merlin, maybe we have switched roles."

"What are you blathering about?" Hermione asked.

"Think about it. There I am, screaming like a girl, trying to get away from the thing, while you pick up a chair to bash it if it gets out." Ron shook his head. "This is pathetic. I'll never hear the end of it if my brothers find out."

"I won't tell them, Ron, if you get your homework done sometime this month," Hermione said. The smile she shot him was all teeth.

"Blackmail," Ron said, his eyes wide. "You've been taking lessons from Fred and George."

When Hermione scowled, Harry stopped her before she could reply. "Why didn't you just use your wands?"

"Are you daft? We can't use magic!" Ron exclaimed.

"We'd be expelled," Hermione added.

"The Ministry can't track the use of magic in this house," Harry told them, shaking his head.

Ron's jaw dropped and Hermione's eyes widened.

"Well, why didn't you tell us that?" Ron finally asked him.

"Er...it hadn't come up yet?"

"You...I...Why..." Growling with frustration, Hermione pushed past them and went into the library. "It must be the Fidelius."

Following her, Harry shrugged. "That's what I assumed."

"You still could have told us," Ron muttered.

"I would have gotten around to it. Besides, I told you not to open the refrigerator."

"I forgot. I was going to grab a few butterbeers before we came up," Ron told him. "Wait a minute! If you can use magic, why haven't you gotten rid of that thing?"

"I told you, I want to give it to Hagrid."

"Oh, right."

"If you two are finished?" Hermione asked, holding up the notebook she'd managed to grab before scrambling out of the kitchen. "There are some things we should talk about."

Sitting down at the table, Harry slide a bookmark into place and closed the book he'd been reading. Leaning back on his chair, he looked at his friends and waited.

"You were right," Hermione told him as she sat down across from him. "We know most of what you've written." She placed the notebook on the table in front of her. "But we're seeing it from a new perspective, now. This is going to sound bad, and I don't want to hurt you, Harry, but I never stopped to think about this from your angle. Ron and I were with you through most of it, but it was all aimed at you, not us."

"I think it allowed us to distance ourselves from most of it," Ron added, taking a seat next to Harry. "But in doing so, it also made it harder for us to understand just what was happening to you."

"Those brain things really did a number on you, didn't they?" Harry asked, a bit surprised.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ron yelled.

"Sorry, it's just that you've never been this perceptive before," Harry replied.

"He's right," Hermione said, turning to Ron.

"Gee, thanks for the support," Ron grouched.

"Honesty, Ron. Remember?" she asked.

"Fine. So I wasn't just a prat, but an ignorant prat. Now, can we get back to the topic at hand, please?" he asked, feeling put out.

"You're not ignorant, Ron. I still can't beat you at chess," Harry told him.

He grinned. "Yeah, that's true."

"Now that the ego has been stroked, may we continue?" Hermione asked.

"Right, sorry," Harry said. "What did you want to know?"

"As I said, we know most of this. But the stuff you wrote about this summer is new. Harry, I don't want to anger you, but I have to ask this. Could you have exaggerated what happened?"

"No," Harry replied firmly.

"Are you sure? I know when I'm angry I sometimes..."

"This will go a lot faster if you see it for yourself," Harry told her. Reaching across a stack of books, he grabbed the pensieve Moody had given him.

Seeing the bowl-like object, Ron's eyes widened. "Where did you get that?"

"Moody gave it to me," Harry said. "It's a presentation pensieve, something the aurors used to use."

"Are you sure you know how to use it?" Hermione asked, concerned.

Not bothering to answer, Harry found the memories he was looking for and deposited them, one by one, into the bowl. When he was done, he tapped it three times and nearly smiled when Hermione cocked her head at the ringing sound the pensieve made with each tap.

"Whoa," Ron exclaimed as the memories were displayed above the bowl.

The three were silent as the memories played themselves out. While Harry took possession of his memories once more, Ron and Hermione looked at each other, not sure what to think.

"And these are the people who are supposed to lead us through the war?" Hermione muttered.

"But Fred, George and I told Dumbledore about how your relatives were treating you at the beginning of second year," Ron exclaimed, his face red with anger. "He told us he'd take care of it!"

Harry snorted. "He lied, Ron." Seeing Hermione's shocked expression, he leaned forward. "What? You think Dumbledore isn't capable of lying to achieve his goals?"

"What goal could he possibly achieve by allowing you to be treated like that?" Hermione asked, furious.

Harry held out both hands, palms up, and shrugged. "I don't know. I only know that at the end of fifth year, after telling me the prophecy, he said he knew what he was condemning me to when he placed me with my relatives. He knew what I went back to each summer."

"And still insisted that you had to be there," Ron added.

"Because of the blood wards?" Hermione asked, chewing on her knuckle.

"For the first ten years? Yeah, I could buy that...maybe. But after he started Hogwarts? There was no reason for it," Ron told her.

"It was the safest place for him," Hermione said.

"Not really," Ron said, thinking quickly. "Strategically, Headquarters would have been the safest place. The Dursley's house isn't hidden. Voldemort could have found him there. He might not have been able to breach the wards, true, but any time Harry left the house, Death Eaters could have grabbed him."

"God, he's right," Hermione whispered, horrified at the implications.

Ron turned to Harry, shaking his head. "This doesn't make any sense. Dumbledore had to know how vulnerable you were there."

"Unless he's a complete idiot. But if he knows, why does he keep sending me back?"

Ron looked at Hermione a bit helplessly. "You got anything?"

"Only that Dumbledore isn't an idiot," she said. Seeing Harry scowl at her, she clarified. "I'm not defending him, but it's the truth. He's an intelligent man, which means something else is going on, something we haven't been able to puzzle out."

"Whatever it is can't be good," Ron muttered.

"Not for Harry, at any rate. So what do we do?" Hermione asked, looking at her best friends.

"I don't know what you two plan on doing, but I'm not going to do anything," Harry said firmly. When his friends began to protest, he smiled and raised his voice so he could be heard. "I'm not going to do anything Dumbledore or anyone else wants me to do. If I could figure out a way of not going to Hogwarts, I'd stay here and let Dumbledore rot."

"That's easy enough to solve," Ron said helpfully. "Step beyond the Fidelius charm and use your wand."

"No! Harry, you can't neglect your education!" Hermione protested vehemently.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I wouldn't. We both know tutors are available and I could hire them easily enough. Besides, Ron's idea is no guarantee. Dumbledore could smooth things over quick enough at the Ministry. He's done it before, after all."

"I didn't think of that," Ron said, scrubbing a hand across his eyes. "I suppose you could attack Snape."

"I already did that," Harry said, grinning.

"What?" Hermione asked, aghast.

"And I missed it? Harry, you need to play that memory for us!" Ron exclaimed, his eyes dancing.

Watching Hermione, Harry shook his head. "Maybe later, Ron," he muttered quietly.

"I heard that," Hermione snapped.

"We're getting a little off track, I think," Harry said quickly, hoping to distract Hermione's pending lecture. "Dumbledore brought you both here to talk me out of the house. It isn't going to work. There's nothing either of you could say that would convince me that I'm better off somewhere else."

"He wants you to spend the rest of the summer at the Burrow," Hermione told him.

"I like the Burrow," Harry admitted. "But it puts the Weasley's in danger and I won't do that. Besides, I like being here. I can do what I want."

"We're always in danger, mate," Ron said seriously.

"Because of your friendship with me," Harry said bitterly.

"Don't flatter yourself." Ron laughed. "Sure, that might add a bit to it, but my parents haven't exactly been the torch bearers for pure blood rights. Dad's fascination with and protection of muggles marked our family as traitors long before you entered the picture."

"Sorry, Ron. I hadn't thought of that," Harry said sheepishly. "Look, leaving the house puts me back under Dumbledore's control. You've read through my notebook and seen the memories, so you should understand just what that will mean."

Hermione shoved away from the table and stood up. "I still can't believe what the Headmaster's done to you," she ranted. "All this time I thought he was looking out for you, trying to keep you safe." She spun to face him. "Dumbledore knows what you've been through. Has he said anything to you about why he continues to allow such abuse?"

"Only that he's trying to keep me safe," Harry said, shaking his head. "I would have thought the Dementors would have been enough proof that, even with the blood wards, the Dursley's house isn't the safe haven he thinks it is."

"Yeah, but you weren't in the house when they attacked," Ron pointed out.

"True, but your father hooked up the floo to the house, remember? What's to stop someone else from doing it? We know there are Death Eaters working at the Ministry," Harry said, frowning.

"But Lucius Malfoy's in Azkaban," Hermione reminded him.

"Not for long," Ron muttered angrily. "Dad's heard things. There are rumors that those caught in the Department of Mysteries will be pardoned soon and released."

Hermione paled and traced the scar Dolohov's attack had left her with. "Can't Dumbledore block their release?" she asked.

"Dunno," Ron said, shrugging. "Dad's told him about the rumors, but Dumbledore doesn't seem concerned over it."

Harry laughed bitterly. "The old man will fight to keep me under his thumb, but won't raise a finger to keep a group of Death Eaters in prison."

Hermione rubbed a hand over her face. "This just keeps getting worse and worse."

"Even if they get out, Harry's safe here at Headquarters. And even if he did go back to the Dursley's, there's still the blood wards."

"The wards are rubbish," Harry told them. "Oh, they'll keep Voldemort out, but there's nothing to keep his Death Eaters from walking in."

"Harry, you can't know that," Hermione protested.

"Sure I can. Every time Dumbledore's mentioned those wards, he's stressed that they'll keep Voldemort from entering. He's never said anything about Death Eaters. The only reason they haven't attacked is because they don't know where the house is."

When Hermione tried to protest, Harry waved her to silence. "Even if I've got that part wrong, and I don't think I have, there's nothing to stop a few Death Eaters from sealing the house and torching it with us inside. I may not be very fond of my relatives, but I don't want them killed because of me."

"Maybe it was something Dumbledore overlooked when he set the wards?" Hermione asked, beginning to pace. "I find that hard to believe."

"Even if it was, there are enough people who know about the wards, Hermione. You can't tell me they've all overlooked something this obvious," Ron said. "My parents know about them. Those on guard duty outside the house know about them. Someone should have figured this out by now."

"Let me get this straight," Hermione said as she passed a bookshelf and circled the couch. "Dumbledore knows about Harry's treatment at the Dursley's, yet let's it continue, citing the protection of the blood wards as a reason. The blood wards are designed to keep Voldemort out, but not his Death Eaters."

Ron, who'd been watching Hermione pace, quickly closed his eyes as his head began to spin. "Sounds about right."

"Don't forget Snape and his Occlumency lessons," Harry added.

"I'd like to," Ron muttered.

"What about him?" Hermione asked.

"Dumbledore's the one who instructed Snape to teach me Occlumency. You both know how those lessons went. I complained to Dumbledore about them, but he insisted that Snape was the only one who could teach me and made me continue. Those lessons only served to open my mind to Voldemort, not close it, and you both know where that led."

"Blood, brain creatures and a dead godfather," Ron muttered tactlessly, causing Harry to wince.

After glaring at Ron for a moment, Hermione looked at Harry. "It sounds like some grand conspiracy theory."

Harry widened his eyes in mock shock. "Maybe it was all caused by UFO's!"

"Harry!" Hermione protested.

"What's a UFO?" Ron asked, his brow crinkled in puzzlement.

"Later," Hermione said, waving away his question.

"Look, I'm not proposing a conspiracy. I'm simply laying out the facts I have. They might be connected, they might not. There are too many things that don't make sense and I can't pass them all off as coincidence."

When Hermione tilted her head and waited for him to continue, Harry rolled his eyes.

"All right, let's start with the Dursley's. Dumbledore knew how they were treating me and did nothing. He said he couldn't remove me because of the blood wards, but we'll get back to that in a second. Even if the blood wards don't have the flaws I think they do, what was to stop him from having a little talk with my relatives? He forced them to take me in. He could have forced them to treat me better, but didn't.

"On to the blood wards. So, they can keep Voldemort out, but Dumbledore's said nothing about Death Eaters. The house was hooked up to the floo network once. It could be hooked up again. Even disregarding that, we know people can portkey in and out. Order members have done it. So have I, for that matter. People can also apparate into the house, assuming they know where it is.

"And that seems to be the key to the blood wards, at least part of it. Voldemort can't cross the wards, but his Death Eaters can, if they find it." Harry shrugged. "It's nice of the Headmaster to keep Voldemort out, but apparently it's okay for his minions to drag me out to him."

"There's a thought to keep you awake at night," Ron muttered.

"I could write a book on it," Harry told him. "You both know about Snape and his Occlumency lessons. He's a marked Death Eater, supposedly a spy for Dumbledore. We've been told over and over that Voldemort is the most powerful Dark Lord, ever. He's also said to be the most powerful wizard in the world, other than Dumbledore. If that's true, how do you suppose Snape's able to keep secrets from him?"

"You think Voldemort knows everything Snape knows?" Hermione asked, her eyes wide.

"I don't know if I'd go that far. But I don't think the bastard's as trustworthy as Dumbledore thinks he is," Harry told her.

"I know I've never trusted him," Ron said. "Great, greasy bat!"

"Do I really need to go into the specifics of our time at Hogwarts?" Harry asked. "The stone and the fact that three first years could find it? The chamber no one but I could find? My name in the Goblet of Fire, Cedric's death and a Death Eater posing as a Professor? Umbridge, and the fact that she sent Dementors after me before she ever met me? The disaster at the Department of Mysteries and Sirius' death?"

Shaking his head, Harry stared at Hermione for a moment. "I'm not saying there's a conspiracy, just that Dumbledore's 'protection' hasn't amounted to much."

"He's right, Hermione," Ron said, quietly. "Every time he's gotten into a jam, he's gotten himself out."

"Usually with the help of my two best friends," Harry added.

Ron grinned. "Yeah, true."

"So, what's the bottom line here, Harry? What are you saying?" Hermione asked as she sat back down at the table.

"I'm saying 'no'," Harry told her simply. "No to Dumbledore's protection, no to the Order of the Phoenix. Hogwarts is a fine school if one wants to learn how to brew potions, grow magical plants or turn matchsticks into needles. Unfortunately, I don't want any of that. I just want to live, Hermione, and no one at Hogwarts seems able or willing to teach me how to survive Voldemort."

Ron scowled down at his shoes. However much he might have wanted to dispute what Harry said, he couldn't.

Hermione covered her face with both hands for a moment, then lowered them to look at Harry. "So, you're not going back?"

"I don't think I have a choice in that. Dumbledore will make sure I have no choice," Harry told her. "I'm simply refusing to participate. They might be able to force me to go to class, but they can't make me do anything other than attend."

"How long will that last?" she asked him.

"Until Dumbledore removes his head from his ass."

Ron grinned "Can't see that happening anytime soon."

Harry ignored him. "I know how important an education is, Hermione. But what good will it do me if I'm dead?" he asked her quietly.

"Passive resistance," she muttered, staring at him.

"What?" Harry asked, confused.

"It's a form of nonviolent protest," she explained. "Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. were among the most famous advocates of passive resistance. People would gather in public buildings, sit down and refuse to move when ordered to do so. They were often arrested for civil disobedience, but when you're dealing with thousands of protesters, it's a real strain on law enforcement. That's just one example. Basically, it's trying to force a change in policy or opinion by nonviolent means. In other words, 'saying no', as you put it."

Ron's eyes narrowed. "This could be interesting. Does it work?"

Hermione shrugged. "Sometimes. But I don't think it would work well with just one person."

"I'll help," the red head offered. "Anything that gets me out of classes and homework can't be bad."

"Ron, this isn't a joke!" Hermione fumed.

"Oh, lighten up. I know it's not a joke, and I was serious about helping. Dumbledore's way hasn't worked. I say it's time for Harry to do things his way. Why wouldn't this work?"

"Even with two people, or three, if I joined you, it's just not enough people to make a big enough impression!" Hermione's eyes widened. "But if we told people what we were planning," she began.

"Uh, Hermione," Harry said, growing alarmed.

"We could start with Gryffindor. I know a lot of them would help. We could get the D.A. involved too! If they knew what Harry had gone through, they'd back him up, and that might bring in Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, as well."

"Hermione, it's a nice idea," Harry tried again.

"We could start with Ginny," she continued, growing more enthusiastic. "She'd be able to get most of the other Gryffindor sixth years to the Burrow to explain what's happening. We could send her a copy of Harry's notebook, so they could read it themselves."

"Hermione, stop!" Harry yelled, causing the witch to jump and glare at him.

"What? Harry, this could work!" she protested.

"Maybe, but you're overlooking something. I'd really rather not have my personal life paraded through the school, thank you!"

Ron shook his head. "I don't mean to sound harsh, Harry, but if airing your personal life to the school results in Dumbledore actually listening to you, isn't it worth it?"

Harry scowled at him. "Easy to say when it's not you being embarrassed!"

"Listen, if it works, this idea will disrupt the whole school and the Headmaster will have no choice but to at least hear you out. So, it's embarrassing. Voldemort's killed too many people to count. How many people have died of embarrassment?" Ron asked.

"He's right, Harry," Hermione said quietly.

"You're only saying that because you see this as some nifty new project," Harry told her bitterly.

"Yes, keeping my best friend alive, which is what he said he wanted," she snapped. "It was your idea in the first place."

"Not to bring the whole bloody school into it!" Harry shouted.

"It's the best chance you have to make this work," she told him firmly. "Dumbledore's been ignoring your complaints for years, Harry. What makes you think he'll change his mind? He might just decide to wait you out, figuring you'll grow tired of it."

"I won't," Harry muttered.

"And what will you do if Dumbledore figures that out too late? Will you sit at the Dark Lord's feet and refuse to move? Will you stare down his wand and refuse to die when he casts the killing curse on you?" Hermione asked, her eyes boring into his.

When he turned away from her, she reached across the table and grabbed his hand. "Harry, if you go back to Hogwarts and do this on your own, you'll turn the whole school against you, starting with Gryffindor. They won't understand why you're doing it. All they'll see is that Professor Snape was right. To them, you'd be a spoiled, petulant child, doing his best to lose them the House Cup!"

"Do you think I care?" Harry asked, jerking his hand away.

"You will, once the House turns against you," Ron told him. "And don't try to deny it, either."

"You see yourself going up against Dumbledore and the Order," Hermione said earnestly. "But the fact is, if you do this, you'll be going up against the whole school! Oh, sure, it might be funny at first, but eventually the other students are going to grow resentful, unless they understand why you're doing it."

"You're assuming they'll all support me. You know as well as I do that they'll turn on me at the drop of a hat!" Harry growled. "They've done it before."

"You're right, they have," Hermione agreed. "But if you think back on those incidences, you'll realize that they didn't have all the information. They didn't know the truth."

"And if you do this your way," Ron added, "you'll go through it again. Look, mate, Hermione and I will support you, either way. But if you want this to work, you'll need more help than..."

The loud pop of Kreacher's appearance in the library made all three jump.

"Will nasty master be leaving the people on the lawn?" the elf ask, scowling first at Ron, then Hermione.

Ron's eyes widened. "I forgot about them."

"So did I," Hermione replied, chewing on her bottom lip. "What should we tell them?"

"Whatever you want. I'm not leaving," Harry told them.

"Yes, Harry," Hermione said, rolling her eyes. "Believe it or not, we figured that part out already." When he shot her a glare, she shook her head. "Don't go petulant on me. I think you're right to stay here. You can't go back to the Dursley's house, and going to the Burrow would only have Dumbledore watching your every move."

"And pulling your chain," Ron muttered.

"No matter what Dumbledore says, you're safer here than anywhere else," Hermione continued. "I'm just a little nervous about his reaction when we come out without you. He seemed to think we agreed with him and would be able to talk you out."

"Mum's never going to let me hear the end of it," Ron moaned.

"So why not stay here?" Harry asked, looking between the two.

"What?" Hermione exclaimed. "We can't live here for the summer!"

"Why? You just pointed out how safe it is," Harry told her. "Besides, if you're going to plan a revolt at Hogwarts, you might need my input."

"You'll do it?" Hermione exclaimed, jumping to her feet.

"Yeah. It's not like I have a lot of choice, is it?" he mumbled. Then his eyes grew sly. "They were all worried about me being left alone in the house with only a demented, evil house elf for company." Seeing the elf staring at him with narrowed eyes, he almost winced. "Er...sorry, Kreacher."

The elf shrugged. "Kreacher is what you say." Then he grinned maliciously. "But then, nasty master isn't as nice as everyone thinks."

Shaking his head, Harry turned back to his friends. "Anyway, as I was saying. If the two of you stayed here with me, that rather neatly takes care of one of their 'concerns', doesn't it?"

Ron laughed. "Maybe the hat should have put you in Slytherin! Not that there was any doubt, but I'm in. A summer of no adults ordering me around, no siblings to worry about, and a mutiny to plan? Sounds grand to me!"

Both young men turned to stare at Hermione.

"Well?" Ron asked.

"It would make the planing a lot easier, but my parents think I'm spending the summer at the Burrow," she told them.

"Hedwig's upstairs. Send them a note," Harry told her.

"And tell them what?" she asked, throwing her hands up in frustration. Turning away, she began to pace again and Ron, learning from past experience, closed his eyes. "Let's see. 'Dear Mum and Dad, I'm no longer at the Burrow. I'm in a home I can't give you the address to because it's hidden and I'm living with two boys. You remember Ron and Harry, don't you? My best friends? We're planning to overthrow the Hogwarts Headmaster and make sure Harry lives through his fight with Voldemort. I don't really have time to explain the fact that the wizarding world is at war and there's a good chance I'll be in some danger, but don't worry! I'm sure everything will work out fine. Love from, Hermione'.

"Oh, yes, that should work perfectly!" She stopped pacing and frowned at them both. "Would you two stop grinning?"

Ron looked at Harry, his lips twitching. "I dunno. The letter sounded about right to me."

Harry shrugged. "Me, too."

"Would you two be serious? This isn't something you put in a letter!" she said, stamping her foot in vexation.

"This isn't brain surgery, Hermione," Harry said, resisting the urge to roll his eyes, knowing it would only set her off again. "Go see them. Explain it to them in person. You've spoken about your parents before. They sound like reasonable people. Besides, they should know about what's going on in the magical world. As much as I hate it, you're a target because you're friends with me. That means your parents are, too. They should be made aware of the dangers."

"It's not a bad idea," she said, thinking.

"Yeah, it might work. But how does she get back?" Ron asked.

"Maybe Moody will make her a portkey," Harry mused.

"Moody? Mad-Eye Moody? Why would he want to help us?" Ron asked. "He's a member of the Order."

"I don't know that he will, but he's helping me. Maybe if I fill him in on the plan, he'd be willing to bring Hermione back," Harry said.

"I'm not sure I like this," Hermione mumbled. "Dumbledore's not going to be pleased, especially if I leave without you and Ron."

"Pretend to be furious when you go out," Ron suggested. "Be angry, Hermione. Rant a bit, you're good at that."

"Thanks," she growled.

Harry grinned and nodded at Ron sagely. "It's true. Hermione in full rant mode is frightening. She'll have Dumbledore shaking in his pointed boots."

"Fine, I'll try it your way," Hermione told them. "But I'm not sure I like the idea of leaving without having a way of getting back."

"Kreacher could retrieve the filthy little mudblood," the house elf suggested, then looked horrified that he'd done so.

"Thanks, Kreacher," Harry said quietly as he stood up. "Oh, and if you ever call her a mudblood again, I'll rip your ears off and stuff them down your throat. Do you understand me?"

Kreacher grabbed his ears and nodded vigorously.

"Why not just order him not to call her that?" Ron asked, staring at Harry in astonishment.

"Nasty master just did," Kreacher mumbled, still holding his ears.

Hermione hugged Harry. "Thanks," she whispered.

He patted her on the back clumsily. "You're welcome."

Pulling away, she turned and hugged Ron. "Your mum's going to be furious. Expect a few howlers," she told him.

"Er, right," Ron mumbled, his face flaming as he squirmed in her embrace.

Drawing away, she smiled at them. "Well, time to see what sort of actress I am. With any luck, I'll see you both in a few days."

"Ron and I will be watching from the upstairs window, though you won't be able to see us," Harry told her as they walked out of the library.

"Be careful, Hermione. Remember, you're furious with us," Ron added.

"I'll give you two a few moments to get upstairs before I go out," she told them. Reaching the front door, she turned and smiled at them. "Once you're gone, I'll open the door. Don't mind the yelling."

"Yelling?" Ron asked as he started up the stairs.

"I've got to make it look good, don't I?" she asked.

"Don't overplay it," Harry cautioned.

"Trust me," she replied.

"I hate it when people say that," Harry grumbled from the top of the stairs. When Ron started toward the back of the house, he rolled his eyes. "No, the front bedroom."

"This house always gets me turned around," Ron complained.

"I really don't think it's the house's fault," Harry said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Hermione shook her head as her friends disappeared. Taking a deep breath, she plastered a furious scowl on her face, turned and jerked the door open. "I can't believe you two!" she shouted over her shoulder. "The Headmaster is only looking out for Harry's safety. If you two can't see that, then there's nothing more to say!"

Slamming the door closed, she walked quickly out to the lawn, her steps radiating anger. She muttered under her breath and clenched her fists at her side.

"Miss Granger?" Dumbledore asked as she drew closer. "What's happened?"

She looked up at the man she'd once respected and nearly growled. "Harry won't come out and Ron's decided he'd rather have a summer with no parental supervision than go back to the Burrow," she exclaimed. "I tried to tell them that it's not safe to stay here, but they wouldn't listen to me!"

"Oh, Merlin! Did she have to say that?" Ron groaned as he peeked out the upstairs window.

"She's right. You'll be getting howlers for sure," Harry said, laughing.

"Yeah, now that's she's painted it in the worst possible light," the red head grumbled.

Harry waved him to silence. "Be quiet, Ron, I can't hear what she's saying."

"...but it's no use," Hermione's rant continued. "They started making fun of me, saying that I cared more for my prefect badge than I did about them!"

"Ronald Weasley!" Molly bellowed. "You get out here this instant!"

"It's no use, Mrs Weasley. They can't hear you," Hermione told her bitterly. "They were down in the kitchen, stuffing their faces." Then she looked at Dumbledore.

"I'm sorry, Headmaster. I tried. I really did. But they just wouldn't listen!" Turning her back to them, she covered her face with her hands. Using the index finger of each hand, she jabbed herself in both eyes several times. When they began to water, she spun back around and bit her lip. "I want to go home!" she wailed. "I want my parents!" Then, seeming to weep brokenheartedly, she threw herself into Mrs Weasley's arms.

Molly looked at Dumbledore helplessly. "Albus, I can't leave," she began.

"Here, I'll take her," Moody growled. "Give the girl to me and I'll see her home."

"Gently, Alastor," Dumbledore cautioned. He untangled Hermione's arms from around Molly's neck and escorted her to Moody. "It's all right, Miss Granger. I'm sure you did the best you could."

"But they're both in there, alone with Kreacher," Hermione hiccuped.

"There, there," Dumbledore soothed as he passed the young woman over to Moody. "Do not worry, Miss Granger. I have another plan that might work."

"Oh, I hope so," she said, sniffing.

"Take her home, Alastor," Dumbledore said.

Nodding, Moody wrapped a hand around Hermione's upper arm and disappeared with a loud cracking sound.

"What do we do now, Albus? My son's in there!" Molly exclaimed.

"As I said, I have another plan. However, standing out here isn't going to accomplish anything. Go home, Molly. I'll contact you as soon as I have more information."

Mrs Weasley looked longingly at the house once more, then apparated away.

Dumbledore stood on the lawn for a few moments, staring at the house. Then, with a sad shake of his head, he, too, disappeared.

Harry and Ron looked at each other for a moment, both a bit stunned.

"I never knew Hermione could act," Harry muttered.

Authors Notes:

Mental note: Never offer cookies for reviews. It took me all night to bake those damn things!

Okay, here's the deal. If you have a burning question that you absolutely need an answer to, head on over to our Yahoo group and ask it there. I don't want to clutter the notes with review responses unless a bunch of you ask the same question – or I feel the need to torture one of you. Or a few of you. Or all of you!

A bit of information for all of you "write more!" reviewers. I'm not going to write any more of this story for one simple reason. It's already complete. And for your next question, there are nine chapters total.

Once again, I'm not following canon here, so live with it. You know how to exit the story if you don't like it. It was pointed out to me that I shouldn't invite people to "bite me", as I did in the previous AN. But I would like to remind any of you budding bitters/vampires/werewolves out there to remember who you're dealing with. Bite me, and I'll yank out every single one of your teeth, using nothing but a spork!

Oh, one last thing. There is no ship. Don't ask, don't suggest. It's done and I won't change it.

Note from Bob.

If you're sick of the idiotic icons at the top of the screen and you're using Firefox, get AD Blockplus addon and block the images. It's still puts the annoying "share" in the main text field, but at least you don't have to look at those icons anymore.

Disclaimer:

"Alyx! Stop staring at the screen and just write something! Anything!" Bob yelled as he shoved his desk against the office door and looked around, panicked.

Looking up from her blank screen, Alyx stared at her husband in bemusement. "What are you doing now?"

"Can't you hear them?" he asked as he started shoving a bookcase against his desk. "They're trying to break down the door!"

She cocked her head and listened closely. All she heard was Bob's panting and cursing, and the shriek of the bookcase as he slid it across the floor.

"Who's trying to break down the door?"

"The readers! They want another chapter and they're not going to wait any longer. Tell them what they need to know so the story will start!"

"You know, I think this role reversal we have going on has finally caused you to lose what little sanity you had left," she told him as she stood up.

Walking over to him, she pushed him toward his chair. "Go sit down. I'll take care of this."

Moving the bookcase back where it belonged, she then began to push his desk away from the door.

"No! What are you doing? They'll get in and tear us apart!" he babbled, waving his hands around.

"No they won't, dear," she told him, puffing a bit as she slid the desk away from the door.

Panicked, Bob spun away and blurted "We don't own Harry Potter! Start the damn story!"

Rolling her eyes, Alyx gave the desk one more shove, then opened the door. Tilting her head slightly at what she saw, she then turned to Bob.

"Um, now long has it been since you fed them?"

"Fed who? The readers?" he asked, staring at her blankly.

"No, them!" she said, pointing at the doorway.

Leaning out from his chair, he peeked around the corner and blinked.

Crammed into the hall outside the door were fourteen hungry, rather pissed off llama.

Bob looked at Alyx nervously. "But, aren't they yours?"

Shaking her head sadly, she waded out into the hall, herding the llama's outside. "We've switched roles, dear. You're the one with the pets now, remember?"

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that. But hey, does that mean I get to play with your toys, too?" he asked, trotting after her.

"Sure, if you want to die a slow, agonizing death."

"Maybe I should go back to writing the disclaimers," he muttered. "This seems very unfair to me. All the work and none of the toys?"

The Granger Residence...

Moody and Hermione appeared next to a shed in the backyard of a tidy, two storey home.

When Mad-Eye let go of her arm, Hermione turned to face him. "Thank you for bringing me home, sir."

Moody shrugged, though he was busy inspecting the house and the surrounding area. "Figured I better get you out of there before the tears stopped and you had to poke yourself in the eye again."

She grimaced. "Was it that obvious?"

"Dumbledore doesn't know what 'obvious' is, Missy. If he did, he would understand what he's doing to Potter. Besides, I knew you weren't really angry with them. I was watching the three of you in the house." He tapped his cheek below his fake eye. Then, finally looking at her, his face split into a grin. "That was a nice piece of acting, though."

"Thanks," she said, grinning impishly. "The problem is, I'll need to go back there soon and I've no way of doing so."

"If you're asking me for something, Missy, get on with it. I don't like having to guess," he growled.

Standing a little taller, she took a deep breath. "Would you make me a portkey back to the house?" she asked in a rush.

Shaking his head, he dug around in a pocket of his robe for a moment and removed a pipe. "An unauthorized portkey is illegal." With a flick of his wrist, he wand appeared. "Portus," he murmured, tapping the pipe. When the blue glow faded, he held it out to her. "Tap it with your wand when you want to leave."

"Thank you, sir!"

"Don't call me that," he snapped. "The name's Moody. And don't lose that pipe! It's one of my favorites."

"I didn't know you smoked," she commented, sliding the pipe into the back pocket of her jeans.

"I don't."

Opening her mouth to ask the obvious question, she quickly changed her mind. Looking at the house, she waved a hand toward it. "So, is it safe?"

"Of course, it isn't." He glared at the house. "You don't have any wards up. This house is wide open and everyone inside is vulnerable."

"I meant, is there anyone creeping about?" she asked patiently. "There's nothing I can do about the wards, what with underage magic being prohibited."

"There's no one about," he told her. "Go inside. I'll erect a few wards - warning, anti-aparation, anti-ignition - before I leave."

"Thank you, sir...er, Moody."

He looked down at her seriously. "Your friend Potter has a hard fight ahead of him. You willing to set yourself against the old man to help Harry succeed?"

"I am," she told him firmly. "We have a plan."

"Merlin save me from the machinations of teenagers," he grumbled. Noting her questioning look, he reached out and gave her a gentle push toward the house. "Go on with you. Get inside."

"Thanks again, Moody."

Hogwarts, Headmaster's office...

Albus rubbed his temples tiredly as he gazed at the house elf in front of him. Dobby had brought him tea and he'd asked the creature to stay a moment. Dobby, fearing he'd done something wrong, squirmed and fidgeted as he stood in front of the Headmaster's desk.

Sighing, Dumbledore leaned forward and smiled gently, trying to put the elf at ease. "Dobby, you're not in trouble. I have a favor to ask of you."

"A favor, Headmaster?" the elf asked, peering up at him nervously.

"Yes. I need your help with Harry Potter," Albus told him as he pushed his tea cup aside. Noting the bright interest in Dobby's eyes, he nearly smiled. It was no secret the elf cared about Harry. "You know Kreacher, correct?"

Dobby scowled. "Kreacher is a bad elf," he muttered. "He's not right in the head."

"All true, I'm afraid," Dumbledore said. "The problem is, Harry has locked the Order out of Headquarters and is there with Kreacher and Ron Weasley. I don't trust that combination. Many bad things could happen to Harry and we'd never know about it until it was too late to

help. Therefore, I want you to go to Headquarters and keep an eye on things there. Watch Harry, Dobby. He's upset with me and won't allow me inside so we can talk about it. I don't want him to make any foolish mistakes in his anger."

Dobby frowned at the Headmaster. "You want Dobby to spy on Harry Potter?"

"No, not spy. I don't want you to hide from him. Just work for him, take care of him. Make sure Kreacher doesn't harm him or manipulate him into doing something foolish. I will want you to keep me informed, however. I want to know what Harry and Ron are doing in that house."

Dobby looked down, scowling fiercely at his feet. No matter what the Headmaster called it, it sounded like spying to him. He didn't like it, but saying so might lead to him being dismissed. When he finally looked up at Dumbledore again, his eyes shown with eager understanding.

"I will go and protect Harry Potter, sir," he said firmly.

"Excellent. I knew I could count on you!" Dumbledore exclaimed.

Dobby spent several more minutes listening to the Headmaster explain what he wanted, then left the office and gathered his belongings. No matter how things worked out, he knew he wouldn't be working at Hogwarts any longer. Closing his eyes, he reached out, concentrating on the one person he needed to find the most. Then, with a small pop, he disappeared.

Grimmauld Place...

Harry and Ron were still in the library several hours later. Ron, knowing Hermione had been serious, had asked to borrow Harry's text books so he could start on his summer assignments. He didn't think his mother would be willing to send his things along, and hadn't thought that far ahead when he'd made his decision to stay.

The problem of school books was easily solved, since Harry had his. Clothing, however, might be a problem. Harry had said they could send Kreacher to the Burrow, but Ron wasn't sure if he should push

his mother's temper that far. It was no secret she loathed the evil elf. But then, who didn't, really?

Ron had finished his Charms essay and was working on Transfiguration. Harry was reading one of the books Moody had brought him. When Ron leaned back to massage his hand, he glanced around and almost snickered. If Hermione had been there, she would have goggled at them. It was a rare sight to see both him and Harry working quietly on anything that resembled learning.

But she was right in one thing. It was time to grow up.

Sighing, Ron picked up his quill and went back to work.

The small pop that sounded in the room a few minutes later had both young men looking up. Ron, not seeing anything, started to shrug, but Harry stood up.

"Dobby?" he asked, puzzled. "What are you doing here?"

Turning, Ron saw Dobby standing a few feet behind him. Once he'd spotted Harry, he dropped the small bag he was carrying and hurried over.

"Oh, Harry Potter, sir, I'm happy to see you!" the elf exclaimed as he wrapped his arms around Harry's leg and gazed up at him.

"Er, hi, Dobby," Harry said as he reached down to unwind Dobby's arms from around his leg. Crouching down to put himself at eye level, he frowned. "It's nice to see you, too. But what are you doing here?"

Dobby drew himself up angrily. "The Headmaster told me to come here and spy on Harry Potter, but Dobby won't do it. Dobby has left Hogwarts!"

"He what?" Ron asked. "Spy on Harry? What's going on?"

Dobby explained what had happened in the Headmaster's office, growing more angry and agitated by the minute. He ended his tale with a strident, "So I quit. I won't be spying on Harry Potter or his friends for anyone. Dobby is a good elf, and will protect Harry Potter!"

Harry stood up so fast that Dobby jumped back with a frightened squeak. Turning to Ron, his green eyes blazing with anger, he spat, "That bastard!"

"That's nothing new," Ron said, calmly. "We're lucky it was Dobby he asked, though."

"You!" a hoarse voice croaked, causing all three to look toward the doorway.

Kreacher scurried into the room quickly, heading straight for Dobby. "You will not be hurting my nasty master with the filthy, muggle-loving ways of the hairy Headmaster!" the old house elf exclaimed. Reaching out, his hands wrapped around Dobby's throat and both elves disappeared with a loud crack.

Harry froze for a moment, shocked.

"What the hell?" Ron yelped, shoving back his chair and standing up.

"I don't know," Harry said, a bit dazed. "But I intend to find out. Kreacher! Get back here, now!"

The old elf appeared before them, a self-satisfied smirk on his ugly face. "Nasty master doesn't have to worry about the freakish elf any longer. Kreacher took care of him."

"Where is he?" Harry growled.

"Kreacher stuffed him in the refrigerator and cast an anti-apparation ward around it. The traitorous elf should be dead soon." When Ron and Harry bolted from the room, Kreacher scowled. "If you'd wanted to watch him die," he called after them, "all you had to do was ask."

Hearing the humans running down the stairs, Kreacher started after them, mumbling to himself.

Reaching the kitchen several moments later, the old elf blinked in surprise. There, on the floor with his back against the door of the now rocking refrigerator, was his new master. His green eyes were wide with shock or fear, the elf couldn't tell which, and his wand was grasped firmly in his right hand. Across the room from him, leaning

against the far wall, was the red head. His eyes were as wide as Harry's and his arms were full of trembling, weeping house elf.

"It tried to eat me!" Dobby cried. "It tried to eat me and I couldn't get out!"

"Everything needs to eat," Kreacher commented to no one in particular.

Dobby's head came up and he launched himself at Kreacher so quickly, Ron could do nothing to prevent it.

Within moments, both elves were on the ground, rolling around, punching, kicking and biting at each other. The grunts of pain and howls of anger rang out in the kitchen and caused the refrigerator to rock and bounce more vigorously, as if the creature inside could sense that bloodshed was imminent.

"Harry," Ron called over the noise the elves were making. "You might want to move away from that thing." He watched the bouncing appliance warily.

Harry pushed himself to his feet, spun around and kicked the refrigerator. "Knock it off or I'll cut you up and give you to Snape for potion ingredients!"

The appliance stopped moving so abruptly that both young men blinked in surprise.

"That was easy," Harry muttered, turning away. Before he could take a step, however, the refrigerator door swung open, smacking him in the back hard enough to send him stumbling. Before Harry could turn around to face the thing, Ron had his wand out and the door shut and locked tight.

"Great, a carnivorous creature with a twisted sense of humor," Harry muttered.

"Let's deal with that later," Ron said, still eying the refrigerator. "Right now, you might want to take care of the elves before they beat each other to a pulp."

"What?" Harry looked around and spotted the ruckus. "Oh, I so don't need this!" Wading into the fray, he ordered both elves to stand down. When Kreacher and Dobby separated, they continued to shout threats and obscenities at each other until Harry bellowed for quiet.

"Dobby, go to the library and wait for me," Harry said, pointing at the kitchen door.

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir!" the elf squeaked as he scurried from the room.

"Kreacher," Harry said, turning to the old elf. "Dobby is not to be harmed. I understand why you did what you did, but Dobby has left Hogwarts because Dumbledore wanted him to spy on us and Dobby wouldn't do it."

Kreacher blinked in surprise. "Dobby wouldn't spy on Kreacher for the Headmaster?"

Harry, figuring a white lie wasn't going to harm anything, nodded. "That's right. He wouldn't spy on you, Ron or myself. Not for anyone. He came here to tell me what Dumbledore wanted him to do, not to cause us any harm."

Kreacher scowled and looked down for a moment. "I understand, but I still don't like that elf. He's not right in the head." Yanking on one ear rather firmly, he looked back up at Harry. "Would nasty master allow Kreacher to seal the house to keep other elves away? The evil little bastards can be sneaky."

"That's a good idea," Harry agreed. "The only house elves allowed in are you and Dobby."

Sighing, Kreacher nodding in understanding, muttered something under his breath, then clapped his hands. The house shook slightly.

"It is done," the old elf said quietly.

"Thank you, Kreacher. Ron and I will go back to the library."

"Would nasty master and his blood traitor friend like tea?" Kreacher asked.

Two humans and one elf all blinked in surprise at the offer. Kreacher looked down at his feet and frowned. Why did he keep offering to serve the master? He didn't really like him, did he?

"No. No tea. But butterbeer would be nice," Harry said quietly.

"Kreacher will bring it to you shortly."

Harry turned, waving Ron toward the kitchen door. "Thanks. Oh, and Kreacher? If you call Ron names again, I'll send you to work in the home of a muggle born Hufflepuff. Do you understand me?"

Kreacher sighed again, knowing Harry was twisted enough to do just what he threatened. "I understand, but you're taking all the fun out of this," he grumbled.

Harry nearly laughed. Instead, he stared at the elf for a moment, then let the small, twisted, evil smile play over his lips. "Don't worry, Kreacher. There are still plenty of people I plan on paying back for what they've done to me. Follow my orders and I'll let you play, too."

Kreacher's eyes lit up. "Nasty master would do this for Kreacher?" When Harry nodded, the elf let out a whoop of happiness and danced toward the pantry and the butterbeer inside.

Shaking his head, Harry exited the kitchen. When he entered the library a few moments later, he was surprised to see Ron speaking gently to Dobby, trying to calm the elf.

Seeing Harry, Dobby squeaked.

"He's not mad, Dobby," Ron soothed, then looked at his friend questioningly.

"Ron's right," Harry said as he sat down at the table and sighed. "I'm not angry with you, Dobby, but I can't have you and Kreacher fighting." When Dobby opened his mouth, Harry held up a hand. "Enough. I've already spoken to Kreacher about it and he'll not hurt you. You'll make the same promise, or you can't be here."

Dobby blinked. "I promise not to hurt Kreacher unless he tries to hurt me."

"Good enough," Harry muttered. "So, you're not going back to work at Hogwarts?"

The elf scowled. "No. Dobby won't work there."

Harry looked at Ron, who shrugged. Rubbing his face tiredly, he squashed the urge to grumble and instead offered Dobby a job with him.

The cry of happiness wasn't surprising, but the impact of the small body against his knees jarred him slightly. Looking down with some amusement, he met the shining eyes of the elf and listened as Dobby pledged to serve and protect him always.

As the elf paused for a breath, Ron sat down across from Harry and grinned. "Hermione's going to throw a fit."

"No, she won't," Harry disagreed.

"Harry Potter is right. Dobby is being paid, so the Dark Seamstress will be happy," Dobby added.

Ron and Harry stared at the elf.

"Dark Seamstress?" Ron finally asked, his voice hoarse.

"Oh, God, that's perfect," Harry said, trying to choke back his laughter.

Ron slid into his chair and stared at Harry. "She'll kill him if she hears that name," he muttered, before beginning to laugh.

Getting control of himself, Harry looked at Dobby. "You can't call Hermione that, Dobby. It would hurt her feelings. Oh, and call me Harry."

As the elf went into another spasm of joyful babbling, Harry closed his eyes tiredly. Then, thinking about the problem of Ron's things being at the Burrow, he grinned.

"Dobby, I need you to do something for Ron. He left all his things at the Burrow and he needs them. Can you get them for him and bring them back here without being seen by the Weasley's?"

Letting go of Harry's legs and dancing back a few steps, Dobby nodded eagerly. "I can do that! I'll be back soon!" Then, with a small pop, he was gone.

"Well, I didn't mean now," Harry muttered, frowning slightly.

"It's better this way," Ron said quietly.

When Harry turned toward him, he saw Ron looking at the doorway and Kreacher, who was entering with a tray, upon which were eight bottles of cold butterbeer and a tin of mixed biscuits. The elf placed the tray on the table and asked if they'd need anything else.

Harry explained that Dobby was working for him now, but that Kreacher was responsible for the house and everything that went on within it. Mollified somewhat, the elf accepted the news with something approaching grace, and after receiving permission, withdrew from the library.

Ron looked at Harry and shook his head. "I hope Hermione's having an easier time of it than you are," he said quietly as he reached for a bottle on the tray.

Granger Residence...

She wasn't, of course.

After all, she'd dumped five years worth of bigotry, danger, bloodshed and finally war on her unsuspecting parents and hoped for the best. There wasn't any way to really prepare them for what she had to say, so she simply laid out the facts and waited for the resulting explosion.

She didn't have to wait long.

Her mother gasped loudly and her father went nuclear.

As her father paced the kitchen and laid down the law, Hermione sighed to herself and wound a piece of hair around her finger calmly, waiting for him to run out of steam.

"Do you understand me, young lady?" John Granger finally growled, leaning over her and looking fierce.

Hermione loved him dearly, but he did tend to be a bit over dramatic. "I understand, Dad. Now, let me tell you why it won't work," she told him. When he growled at her, she let a bit of her own temper show. "Oh, stop hovering and sit down," she snapped.

Diane Granger's lips twitched slightly. The two were more alike than they realized. "Do sit down, John. You're starting to give me a headache."

"Diane!" John yelped.

"Sit!" Hermione barked and was just as surprised as her parents when her father's ass hit the seat of the chair with gratifying speed.

Sighing, Hermione leaned forward. "Now, pulling me out of Hogwarts will only cause the two of you more trouble than you realize. Enrolling me in public school is going to start a chain of events neither of you will like. After all, there is no record of me going to any school in Britain for the last five years. Do you really want to explain to the authorities why you've kept me out of school all this time?"

"We'll tell them about Hogwarts," her father said, scowling at her.

"That's a crime. Remember what Professor McGonagall told you about the magical world and the secrecy laws? You two are subject to those laws because of me. If you tell anyone about Hogwarts, you'll be brought before the magical courts to answer for it. They won't go easy on you. As a matter of fact, with the Dark Lord's return and his servants being employed at the Ministry, you can bet they'll be harsher on you, as parents of a muggle born and a friend of Harry Potter's, than they would on anyone else."

"We could always leave the country," Diane mused.

"Yes! Right! We'll move to Canada," John blurted out.

"You can, if you like. I won't run away from this. Harry and Ron need me and I'll not turn my back on them now. Besides, the Dark Lord has contacts everywhere. You'd have to change your names, your profession, even your looks, to stand any chance of going unnoticed."

"We can do that. And you'll come with us. You're still underage, my girl," John growled.

"True. But you'll have the same problems in Canada that you would here. I have no school records and mentioning Hogwarts will get you arrested in Canada by the magical police as quickly as it would here. They'll deport you and...well, you know the rest." Hermione was bluffing for all she was worth. While she wasn't sure of her facts on international magical law, she knew her parents were completely clueless on the subject.

John's angry expression crumbled and he looked at Hermione, his fear for her plain. "I don't like you being in danger. Maybe you shouldn't be friends with Harry anymore."

Hermione reached out and took his hand gently. "Dad, I was in danger the moment I cast my first spell. Even if I wasn't a friend of Harry's, the fact that I'm a muggle born, and smart, means I'm a target. I represent everything the Dark Lord hates. Even if I withdrew from Hogwarts and didn't talk to Harry again, I'd still be in danger. But even if I wasn't, I won't run from this fight or leave Ron and Harry to fight it alone."

Diane watched them both fondly. She was terrified for her daughter, but proud of the young woman she'd become. "John, you can't ask her to turn her back on this," she said quietly.

"The hell I can't!" he exclaimed.

"You're the one who taught her to stand up for what's right and to fight for those things worth having. Is her life, and her place in the magical world, not reason enough for you?" Diane asked quietly.

John looked between the two most important people in his life and growled. Pushing away from the table, he stood up. "I need to think about this." He stalked out of the kitchen, muttering to himself.

Sighing, Hermione turned to her mother and waited. The lengthy silence that followed did nothing for her nerves.

"I don't like it," Diane finally said. "I don't like that you're tangled up in any of this or that you're in danger. In the middle of a war at sixteen? Lord, Hermione, what are these people thinking?"

"I can't explain it to you, Mum, because I don't understand most of it myself. I've never been able to understand bigotry and hate like this. It defies all logic and reason. But I won't run from it. How could I go back to the magical world when the fighting is over and look anyone in the eyes?"

"Why do you have to go back?"

"Because I'm a witch," Hermione said simple. "That's not all that I am, but I won't deny a part of myself I happen to like very much, just for the chance of going unnoticed by the Dark Lord and his thugs. I won't let them kill that part of me."

Diane stared at her for a long moment, then nodded her head. "I'm proud of you, Hermione," she said quietly. "I'm terrified of what you'll see and what you might have to do to protect yourself. I'm afraid you'll be hurt, or worse. But I'm proud of you for doing what you feel you must and for standing up for what's right."

Standing, Hermione walked to her mother's chair and sank to her knees. Wrapping her arms around her mother's waist, she held on tightly. "Thank you, Mum. I won't pretend I'm not scared. I'd be a fool not to be. But this is something I have to do. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't."

John, standing in the kitchen doorway for the last several minutes, looked into his wife's eyes. When she nodded at him he sighed quietly. "All right, Hermione. You win. Tell us what we can do to make things easier for you."

Hermione's head came up and she gazed tearfully at her father. "How much did you hear?" she asked as she released her mother and stood up.

He shrugged. "Most of it. And like your mother, I'm proud of you. Terrified, but proud."

Hermione hurled herself into her father's waiting arms and sobbed against his chest. "Thank you, Daddy!"

John's arms tighten around his daughter. Closing his eyes, he sent out a silent prayer to God, asking Him to keep his precious child safe in the days to come. Then, pulling away, he wiped the tears from her cheeks and smiled softly. "None of that now, my girl. Sit down. We have a few things yet to discuss."

Morning, Grimmauld Place...

Hermione finished unpacking her belongings from her trunk and sighed. She'd chosen the same room she'd shared with Ginny in the past, mostly out of familiarity.

She'd brought a few things with her via portkey, but the bulk had come by way of Dobby. The elf had gone back to her house and retrieved her trunk. She wouldn't be going home again for the summer, though her parents had said they'd meet her at the station on the first of September to see her off. She would miss them, but she needed to be with Harry and Ron. Thankfully, they'd understood.

Leaving the bedroom, she went downstairs to find the boys. Expecting them to be in the kitchen, she was startled when she heard voices coming from the back of the house. Changing directions, she paused in the doorway of the library and blinked, unsure of what she was seeing.

Harry was hunched over the table, reading a book. Ron sat across from him, writing quickly and muttering to himself. Next to him was an open Transfiguration book.

"After taking our OWLs, you'd think they'd give us a summer with no homework," the red head muttered quietly.

"Keep dreaming," Harry replied as he turned the page. "They want to make sure we don't forget everything."

"Too late."

Harry flashed him a quick grin, then spotted Hermione. "Unpacked already? That was fast."

Ron looked up and smiled his greeting.

"It goes much faster when you can use magic," Hermione said. She walked toward the table. "Homework?" she asked them both.

"For me, yeah," Ron said, turning back to his essay. "Harry's finished his."

When Hermione raised an eyebrow, Harry shrugged. "I was bored at the Dursleys. I finished most of it there. I only had Transfiguration and Potions left and did those the first few days here."

"Really? Let's see it then," she said.

"Scary. You're starting to sound like you did in first year," Ron told her, then ducked when she took a playful swat at him.

Harry pointed to a stack of books at the end of the table. "It's all over there, Miss Granger. Please don't grade me too harshly!"

"Prat," she muttered as she walked over to the pile. "I'm only trying..."

"To help," Ron and Harry both chorused. They looked at each other for a moment, then laughed.

Hermione sniffed and turned away. She sat down and pulled the first book toward her. Opening it, she found Harry's Charms essay and began to read.

Half an hour later, Harry put his book aside and stretched. "Well, that's the last of the books Moody gave me to read. You two might want to go through them later."

"Great," Ron grumbled, "more homework." He'd finished with Transfiguration and was now working on Potions.

"Yeah, but this is more interesting than anything the Hogwarts professors ever assigned us," Harry told him.

"Homework is homework, mate," Ron said. "And speaking of, do you think I could take a peek at your Potions essay?"

"You could, yes. But you won't understand it," Harry said, smirking.

"Why is that?"

"Because it's not written in English."

Hermione looked up. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I said." Harry shrugged. "I won't be taking Potions this year, I hope, but Snape insisted I complete the assignment. When I complained to Dumbledore about it, he told me Snape was right and that I had to do the homework."

"Or what? It's not like they can fail you," Ron protested. "They have no say in OWL results."

"He's right," Hermione said. "Why bother doing it at all?"

When both boys gaped at her, she scowled. "What? I'm all for homework, but this is just a waste of time. If you're not going to take Potions, why do the assignment? As Ron pointed out, the Ministry will give you your grade this year."

Harry grinned. "That's why I wrote it the way I did. Snape won't be able to read why mixing belladonna and chocolate pudding is a bad idea. It's written in Parseltongue."

Ron laughed. "Brilliant! Um, just one question. What happens if you mix belladonna and chocolate pudding?"

"Nothing!" Hermione said. "Honestly, Ron."

"That's not true," Harry said. "If you mix in enough belladonna, you get a poisonous pudding."

Hermione rolled her eyes and went back to reading Harry's assignments.

"That's just wrong," Ron muttered. "What a waste of chocolate." With a sigh, he dragged his Potion book over and opened it. "Maybe

I should think about not doing the homework. It's not like I'll be taking Potions this year."

"That's up to you," Harry said.

Ron looked at him for a moment, then glanced at Hermione.

"Don't look at me," she said. "It's your homework to do or not. I won't say anything either way."

The red head began to flip through the book until he found the section he needed to complete his essay. "Might as well do it. Then I can walk away from that bloody class without feeling as though I left something unfinished."

Harry and Hermione exchanged a look. The trip to the Department of Mysteries really had changed Ron. Still immature about some things, he seemed more level headed now. That he would willingly finish an assignment that even Hermione thought unnecessary said a lot about how much he had grown up.

"No comments on my essays?" Harry asked.

"They're fine the way they are," Hermione said absently. "If Ron can do his Potion essay, I can refrain from nitpicking your writing. Besides, some of your work is really good."

He laughed. "That should tell you how bored I was until you two arrived. Most of the work was interesting."

"You've lost it, mate," Ron said dryly. "Homework interesting? Next you'll tell us that Umbridge was a great teacher and Snape is just misunderstood."

"Git," Harry said, scowling.

"Prat," Ron replied before bending slightly to begin writing his essay.

"Boys," Hermione muttered.

Moody arrived later that morning. He explained that he'd arranged for tutors for Harry. Seeing Hermione and Ron, he shrugged and told them that it might be a good idea for them to join Harry. As they

insisted on fighting along side their friend, they might as well learn how to go about it properly.

"How do we work this, Moody? With the Fidelius in place, they won't be able to find the house."

"Portkey, maybe?" Hermione asked.

"That's a risk," Ron commented. "They'll have to come often, so timed portkeys would be best. But if they were lost or stolen, anyone could show up."

Moody nodded approvingly.

"True, but the wards would just kick them back out again. At least, I think they would," Harry said, a bit unsure.

"That's why we'll be going about this a bit differently. Your tutors won't be coming here. You'll be using a portkey to travel to them, assuming you all agree to this," Moody told them.

"You want Harry to leave Headquarters? He'd be out in the open, then," Hermione protested.

"Do you think I'd expose him to danger, Missy?" Moody growled. "I've taken care of security. The location is under a Fidelius. It's warded and guarded heavily."

The three friends looked at each other, unsure.

"I don't want to rush your decision, Potter, but we do have a bit of a time problem," Moody told him seriously. "I've called in a lot of favors for this. If you don't want training, tell me now so everyone can go home. Remember, some of them are giving up their vacations to help you."

"Great," Harry said, sinking into a chair and holding his head. "Just what I needed; more guilt."

"Get over it," Moody barked. "You're important, training you is important. These people know that."

Harry looked at Ron and Hermione. "What do you think?"

"I don't know," Ron said honestly. "What would we be learning, sir?" he asked, look at Mad-Eye.

"Basic Warding, advanced Charms, Occlumency, Defense and how to fight," the ex-auror told them.

"You mean dueling?" Harry asked.

"Of course not, Potter!" Moody snapped. "Dueling is for show. I'm talking about back ally fighting. Dirty tricks and spells aimed specifically to kill or maim your opponent!"

"What?" Hermione cried.

"Is that necessary?" Ron asked.

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Maiming and killing, you say?"

Ron and Hermione stared at him in astonishment.

"How many Death Eaters did we stun in the Department of Mysteries?" Harry asked his friends. "And how many of them got back up and fought on? Had we aimed to maim or kill, Sirius might still be alive. Do you think someone like Lucius Malfoy will decide not to kill you because of your excellent jelly-legs jinx? Or because your tickling hex was spot on?"

Moody nodded, then turned to Ron and Hermione. "Well?"

The two looked at each other, then agreed reluctantly.

"A dead opponent is best," Moody went on. "But it's not always possible to get in a killing shot. If you can't, take his arms off. You can't cast if you can't hold a wand. If you can't hit his arms, take his legs. You can run then and won't have to worry about him chasing you. Kill if you can, maim if you can't."

"That's disgusting!" Hermione protested.

"That's war, little girl. Learn to accept it now or go find yourself a hole to hide in until this is over!" Moody barked.

"This is something you'll both have to decide for yourselves," Harry told them quietly. "I've talked to Mad-Eye about this before. I don't plan on starting any fights, not yet, anyway. But I will finish them if I can. I'm tired of facing the same Death Eaters time and again. If they come for me, I'll do my best to make sure they can't fight anymore. To do that, I need more training than Hogwarts can provide. Moody offered to help and I'm going to take it. What the two of you do is your business."

"Well said, Potter," Moody complimented. "I heard you wanted to be an auror, Weasley. The training you'll be undergoing will give you a leg up on the competition at the academy. And you, Granger. You'll always be a target. Once Voldemort's dead, there will still be pure blood bigots out there who will resent you, and not just because your Potter's friend, but because you're an intelligent 'mud blood'."

When Harry growled, Moody held up one hand and started at Hermione. "What's it going to be, Missy?"

Hermione's shoulders slumped. "I don't really see that I have much choice. I won't hide while Harry and Ron risk their lives."

"Weasley?" Moody asked.

"I'm in," he said quietly. He was pale and a bit shaken, but he'd vowed to himself he'd help Harry if he could. If that meant killing Death Eaters, he'd do so, whether he liked the idea or not.

Harry looked between the two. "You don't have to do this," he told them.

"Yeah, we do, mate," Ron said.

"He's right, Harry. You may be Voldemort's main target, but Ron and I are in the cross hairs too. And not just because we're your friends." She rubbed her face tiredly. "Mister Moody is right. I'll always be a target for bigots, though if he calls me a mud blood again, I'm going to turn that magical eye of his into an olive." She glared at the old auror.

Moody barked a laugh. "Fair enough, Missy. And don't be calling me Mister."

"I've already explain why my family's in danger," Ron said. "Muggle loving blood traitors and all that."

"Oh, Ron," Hermione began softly.

He waved her off irritably. "It doesn't matter, Hermione. Trust me, my family is used to it. We've never believed in the garbage the Dark Lord and his followers spout about blood purity. We know Harry is the only one who can kill Voldemort, but that doesn't mean we can't help level the playing field by taking out as many Death Eaters as we can."

"I know," Hermione said. "I'm just having trouble wrapping my mind around killing people. I know it's war, but I don't think I understood what that meant until now."

"If we don't, who will?" Harry asked.

"Not Dumbledore or the Order. The Ministry won't either." Ron shook his head. "The aurors will arrest Death Eaters and the Minister will line his pockets with galleons and release them in weeks."

"And we'll have to fight them again," Hermione finished.

Moody looked at the three friends. "Have you decided, then?"

Ron shrugged. "Looks like we're going."

"Yes, it does," Hermione said, sitting up straight.

"When do we leave and how are we traveling?" Harry asked.

"We'll leave the day after tomorrow and travel by portkey to our location." Moody scratched his chin. "Bring along enough clothing for ten days and make sure everything is light weight, though you might want to bring a heavy robe or jacket, just in case."

"We'll be gone for ten days?" Harry asked.

"I didn't say that."

"So how long will we be gone?" Ron asked.

"Just be packed and ready to go," Moody told them. Turning away, he limped out of the room, muttering to himself.

"Couldn't he have given us a straight answer?" Ron grumbled.

"He could have, but I think he enjoys doing it this way," Harry told her.

"What about the elves, Harry? You can't leave them here together," Hermione said. "You told me they've already had one fight."

"They stay away from each other now. I'm not worried about it."

The rest of the day was spent studying. Harry read some of the books from the library, while Hermione started in on the books Moody had brought. Ron worked on his summer assignments.

The next morning, Moody's owl arrived, delivering their test results from the Ministry. Hermione squealed happily when she read her results. Both Ron and Harry were a bit surprised, however. Both had done better than they expected.

"Great, I passed Potions," Harry muttered.

"Yeah, me too. But at least we can drop the class this year," Ron replied.

Another owl arrived after lunch, carrying letters from Hogwarts about course selections for the coming year. Harry scowled down at the bird, not trusting anything from Hogwarts.

"You thinking portkey?" Ron asked.

"Wouldn't put it past the Headmaster, mate," Harry told him. When he pulled out his wand, the owl became agitated and began to screech loudly.

"Wait, Harry," Hermione said, placing her hand over his. "There's no need to upset it. Why not ask Dobby to remove the letters?"

"Good idea. Dobby!"

The elf appeared and looked up with bright eyes. "You called Dobby, Harry Potter, sir?"

"Just Harry, Dobby. And yes, I called you. Would you please remove the letters the owl is carrying? They're from Hogwarts and I don't trust Dumbledore. He may have tampered with them."

Dobby scowled darkly. "I will check, Harry Potter, sir." He approached the table the owl had landed on and reached for the letters. The bird glared at him, but allowed the elf to take them. Once relieved of its burden, it ruffled its feathers, then launched itself into the air and out the open window.

Dobby placed the letters on the table and held his hands over them. A look of concentration crossed his face and his small hands glowed brightly. One letter glowed an ominous red. "It's a portkey, Harry Potter, sir. It won't activate unless you touch it."

"We'll have to neutralize it first," Ron said obviously.

The glow surrounding Dobby's hands turned blue. A moment later, a loud snap was heard and the red aura around the letter winked out. "It is done, Mr. Weasley, sir."

"Call me Ron," the red head said absently. "You know, Dumbledore's going to be disappointed when you don't arrive."

Hermione grinned. "Isn't that a shame?"

"I should find some way of apologizing for my rudeness," Harry said, smiling rather wickedly.

Kreacher popped in and looked up at Harry. "Send Kreacher to Hogwarts, nasty Master. Kreacher will shave the hairy Headmaster and knit you a jumper."

Ron's eyes went unfocused. "Brilliant. A bald Headmaster? Utterly brilliant."

"What a wonderful idea," Harry added, looking at Kreacher approvingly.

"Kreacher," Hermione said, catching the elf's attention. "Is there some way you could make sure the hair can't be grown back via magical means?"

The elf's eyes lit with malicious glee. "Oh, yes, Miss Muggle-born. Kreacher can do that." He looked at Hermione carefully for a moment, then smiled slyly. "You are like nasty Master; not as nice as people think."

"She has her moments," Harry agreed, while Ron laughed quietly.

"When do you want to do this, Harry?" Hermione asked.

He tilted his head slightly in thought. "Tonight," he said firmly. He looked down at Kreacher. "You'll go straight to Hogwarts, nowhere else, and wait until the Headmaster is alone. Can you do this without the Headmaster knowing who did it?"

Kreacher nodded. "I will stun him first. He won't see me."

"Very well. Shave it all off then. When you're done, come straight back here. You are to talk to no one outside this house, nor be seen by anyone outside this house. Do you understand?" Harry asked, his green eyed gaze boring into the eyes of the elf.

"Yes, nasty master," the elf said, a bit disgruntled.

"Oh, and don't knit me a jumper. It's a nice idea, but I have something else in mind. Just bring me all the hair you shave off."

Kreacher cocked his head and wondered what the master had planned. "I will do as you say."

"Excellent. Oh, one other thing before you go, Kreacher. The three of us will be leaving tomorrow. You will be in charge of the house while I'm gone. No one is to be allowed in other than Ron, Hermione, Dobby or myself. Moody too, I suppose, though he'll be with us."

"I will take care of everything. Nasty master doesn't need to worry. No one will get past Kreacher," the elf stated firmly.

"Harry Potter is leaving?" Dobby asked, his eyes wide.

"Yes, for awhile," Harry told him.

Dobby nodded, his eyes sad, then popped away.

"All right, Kreacher, off with you. Remember what I said. Straight to Hogwarts, then straight back here. You're not to be seen by anyone, nor speak to anyone."

"Kreacher understands," the elf stated. After a brief, almost bow, the elf was gone.

"This should be interesting," Hermione said, a smile tugging at her mouth.

"Interesting? Are you kidding? I wish I could see his face when he wakes up and realizes what's happened," Ron exclaimed. "Too bad we can't tell the twins. They could probably get pictures!"

"Let's not complicate things," Harry said. "Pictures would be great, but he'll still be bald, or mostly so, by the time the term starts."

"True. I guess that will have to do," Ron said, a little disappointed.

"So, why did you tell Kreacher to bring you Dumbledore's hair?" Hermione asked.

"Well, I'm not remotely interested in a Dumbledore hair jumper," Harry said, shuddering slightly at the thought. "Besides, it might just come in handy later."

"Handy? For what?" Ron asked.

Hermione eyes narrowed. "I haven't brewed Polyjuice since second year, so I know you're not thinking of asking me to fire up my cauldron."

"Of course not," Harry said, looking highly offended. "There are plenty of cauldrons downstairs."

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Polyjuice?" Ron asked. A grin spread across his face as he realized the implications.

"I'm not saying we'll use it," Harry said calmly, staring at Hermione. "But it might come in handy."

"And if I refuse to brew it?" she asked.

Ron and Harry exchanged a look, then turned to face her. Their eyes were wide and pleading and they were pouting. "Please?" they both begged.

"Oh, stop it. That hasn't worked since fourth year," she said, shaking her head.

"Hmm. Well, I suppose I could try brewing it then," Ron said, looking at Harry.

"Couldn't hurt," Harry agreed.

Hermione choked. "Couldn't hurt? Are you insane? Do you want to end up in the infirmary? Or St. Mungo's?"

"If I remember correctly, you were the one who ended up in the infirmary last time," Harry said.

Ron nodded sagely. "She did, yes."

Hermione's jaw tightened. "Fine," she muttered through clenched teeth, "I'll brew your bloody potion for you."

"Hermione!" Ron exclaimed. "Language!"

Harry laughed. "Oh, that was perfect, Ron!"

Hermione whipped out her wand and silenced him. "Braying jackass," she muttered. "Don't think I'm going to let you do something like this again, Potter."

Ron shook his head. "A few days with us and she's cursing worse than an auror on leave."

Harry, still silenced, slid into a chair, obviously still laughing.

Grumbling quietly to herself, Hermione snatched her Hogwarts letter from the table, sat down and tore it open.

Harry drew his wand and removed Hermione's charm as Ron reached for his own letter.

"As much as I don't want to take Potions, I think I have to," the red head said grumpily. "It's required to be an auror."

Harry frowned as he opened his letter. "I hadn't thought of that."

"You going to take it?" Ron asked.

"Not unless Dumbledore's fired Snape."

"Not a chance, mate."

Harry shrugged. "So I'll take my Potion NEWT later. I can hire a tutor after graduation. If you weren't so stubborn about it, I'd be willing to pay for you, too."

Ron sighed. "Thanks for the offer, but I'll stick with Snape."

"If you change your mind, just let me know."

Half an hour later, they'd each chosen their classes for the coming year. They shared some subjects, such as Charms, Transfiguration and Defense. Harry and Ron both dropped Divination and all three dropped Care of Magical Creatures. Hagrid would be disappointed, but the class wouldn't help them in the coming fight.

Ron and Hermione were both taking Potions and Harry chose an elective called Basic Healing. Hermione stayed with Ancient Runes, explaining that the might be useful in the war.

"I still need one more subject," Harry said. "Any ideas?"

"I need another, too," Ron replied as he examined the list of offered classes. "Maybe Muggle Studies? That would make my dad happy."

"Harry and I can help you in that class," Hermione told him.

"Right, then. Muggle Studies it is." He wrote it down, folded the parchment and sat back.

"They're offering something called Household Magic. Any idea what that is?" Harry asked.

"Spells for cleaning, cooking, laundry. It's a basic class to teach muggle borns and half bloods how to use magic to do every day things," Ron explained.

"They won't teach you anything you can't learn yourself by reading a few books," Hermione said with a sniff of disdain.

"So, an easy class then?" Harry asked.

"Dead easy, mate," Ron agreed.

Harry added it to his list of classes and shrugged off Hermione's glare. "Muggle Studies would be a waste," he told her as he folded the parchment. "Care of Magical Creatures won't help, Divination is rubbish, and it's too late to start Ancient Runes."

"I know. If only Snape wasn't teaching Potions," she grumbled.

"He wouldn't be if Dumbledore wasn't Headmaster," Harry said as he stood up. "Give me your lists and I'll take them up to Hedwig. She'll be happy to have something to do."

When evening came, the trio packed ten days worth of light clothing, as well as the usual personal items. Hermione, of course, included several books. They decided to use backpacks, though they were enlarged so everything would fit. A quick charm to lighten each pack solved the weight issue.

Kreacher arrived after dinner, hauling a large linen bag that resembled an overstuffed pillow.

"No one saw me," the elf said as he dropped his bundle on the floor at Harry's feet. "The no longer hairy Headmaster never knew what hit him." The elf's grin was almost feral. "There's not a single hair left on his body and it won't grow back, naturally or with magic."

Ron grinned. "It won't grow back? That's brilliant." Then his jaw dropped. "Wait. Not a single hair left on his..." He shuddered. "Oh, I don't want to know!"

"I'm sure he doesn't mean everywhere, Ron," Hermione tried to assure him.

"I said what I mean," Kreacher told her. "The hair on his toes was tough, but not nearly as tough as the hair between his -"

"No!" Hermione shouted as she slapped her hands over her ears. "I don't want to hear this!" She began to hum loudly to herself as Kreacher continued to inform Ron and Harry about the difficulties he encountered while removing hair from various places.

Harry held his head in his hands, unsure if he wanted to laugh or sick up. "Thank you, Kreacher. You did a fine job," he choked out.

The elf shrugged. "I enjoyed it. Thank you for letting Kreacher play." He blinked, then scowled when he realized that he was actually grateful to Harry. "If my master has no more need of me, I'll go rest. The plucking charm takes a great deal of concentration and I'm rather tired."

"Plucking charm?" Harry asked.

"I thought you were going to shave him," Ron said.

"Pluck, shave, what does it matter? He's bald now. Besides, plucking hurts more." Kreacher's eyes glowed at the thought.

"Er, right. You may go. And thanks, Kreacher," Harry said.

Nodding, the elf vanished.

"Plucking?" Hermione asked, her eyes dancing.

"Plucking," Ron confirmed.

They looked at each other. A moment later, laughter bounced off the walls as the three friends pictured Dumbledore's reaction.

After breakfast the next morning, Harry pulled Kreacher and Dobby aside for last minute instructions. He wasn't sure when Moody would arrive, but he didn't want to keep the man waiting if he could help it.

Kreacher assured him that he would take care of the house and contact Harry if anything happened. When he was gone, Harry turned to Dobby.

"I'm not sure where we're going or what's going to happen, so I need to ask you for a favor," he told Dobby.

Dobby bounced a few times. "I will do anything Harry Potter asks!"

"Wait until you hear what I'm asking for. You have the right to refuse," Harry told him serious. "I know elves have their own magic. You protected me against Lucius Malfoy in second year, after all." Noting Dobby's scowl at the mention of his former master, he hurried on. "I'd like you to follow us, Dobby. As I said, I'm not sure where we're going. I trust Moody. Well, mostly. But he's being a bit mysterious and that makes me nervous."

Dobby nodded. "I will follow. No one will harm Harry Potter or his friends. Not if Dobby can help it."

Harry relaxed. "Thanks, Dobby. It's probably not necessary, but I feel better knowing you'll be with us."

The elf smiled. "It's better to be cautious than to walk into a trap," he said.

Harry bit his lip. Such wisdom from the sometimes foolish house elf surprised him.

Moody arrived mid-morning to find the teens in the library.

"Everyone packed and ready?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," Hermione said.

"Don't call me that, Missy!" he growled as he walked toward her. "Now, listen up. I'm going to pull out my wand and scan each of you. Potter, stop glaring at me! If I'd wanted to harm you, I could have done so well before now. You all know the Ministry has monitoring

charms on your wands. They need to be removed or you won't be able to use them outside of this house. I can replace them once we get back and the Ministry won't know a thing about it."

Reluctantly, Harry nodded and drew his wand. Ron and Hermione already had theirs out.

"When I'm done, I'll be scanning each of you. I want to make sure there are no tracking charms on you. Potter, I know for a fact you have at least two. One tracks your location, the other tracks your health."

"Dumbledore?" Harry asked.

"Right in one. Now, let's start with your wands." Moody pulled his wand out slowly and deliberately. He wasn't sure what sort of warding Kreacher had put in place to protect Harry, but he wasn't taking any chances. He had no intentions of harming the boy, but he didn't trust the elf.

"Extraho," he said and flicked his wand in a quick motion. Hermione's wand shone a bright white for a moment, then a snapping sound rang through the room and light around her wand disappeared.

He repeated the process for both Ron and Harry. "You can use your wands outside the house, now. I'll put them back on before you go to Hogwarts. No sense asking for trouble if we can avoid it," Moody told them.

Raising his wand again, he pointed it at Hermione. "Hold still, Granger. This should only take a few moments." When she nodded, he moved his wand quickly. "Aperio!"

A hazy, blue aura surrounded her and Moody grunted. "Just as I thought. A tracking charm has been placed on you. Normally, I'd simply remove it. But this is too good an opportunity to pass up."

He looked at the two young men. "Weasley, Potter, watch carefully now. You, too, Granger. I'm going to transfer the tracking charm to the table here in the library."

Once he was sure they were watching him, he moved his wand slowly so they could see the motions, ending with a quick flick towards the table. "Transtuli!"

The aura around Hermione snapped into place around the table, then faded away.

"That was brilliant!" Ron exclaimed.

"Won't the charm just be replaced once Dumbledore knows it's gone?" Hermione asked.

"Probably," Harry said before Moody could answer. "But Mad-Eye just showed us how to take care of that problem."

"Very good, Potter," the ex-auror praised. "Once you're back at Hogwarts, the three of you can scan yourselves or each other. If you find something, you can now either remove it, or transfer it to something, or someone, else."

Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged looks, then burst out laughing. Moody's magical eye spun wildly and he flashed them a rather feral grin.

"You're next, Weasley," Moody said once the teens had recovered. He scanned the red head quickly. As expected, the young man was also saddled with a tracking charm, which was transferred to a teacup on the table.

Hermione had been following along with her own wand and Moody grunted his approval before turning to Harry. "You ready, Potter?"

"Whenever you are," Harry said.

This time, when Moody cast the spell, the aura that appeared around Harry was sharply defined, but muddy in color.

"What the hell is this?" Mad-Eye asked, his head tilted slightly as he examined the aura.

"It's ugly, is what it is," Ron muttered.

"This is more than a mere tracking charm," the old man muttered as he walked around Harry, flicking his wand. "You've got the two I mentioned before; one to track your location and another to track your health. And what's this? It seems as though the Ministry and at least two other people have placed tracking charms on you, as well."

"What?" Harry growled.

"You heard me, Potter. Now don't interrupt. Hmm... Seems your parents placed a monitoring charm on you and...What in Merlin's name? No, we'll come back to those later. Let's get these trackers off you first."

Rather than transfer the spells to objects around the room, Moody destroyed them. When Hermione tried to protest, he glared her in to silence. "Dumbledore will know his charms are gone the moment he sees Potter again. The other two were simple tracking charms. They'd have to be actively seeking him to know the charms are gone," he explained. "I also removed the monitoring charm, as there is no need for it now."

Ron glared at Moody when Harry flinched.

"The removal process seems to have cleared up the aura," Hermione said, trying to sound cheerful.

Moody grunted. "There are still a few things left. One looks to be something from your mother and it's muddying the waters somewhat."

"Can you remove it?" Ron asked quietly.

"Not until I know what it is, Weasley."

Hermione watched Harry with concern. "Are you all right?" she asked, as Moody continued his examination.

"Yeah. It's just..." He shrugged, unsure how to explain.

Mad-Eye stepped away from Harry and looked him in the eye. "Don't worry about it too much, Potter. You were the most important person in your parents lives. Their actions were only ever for your benefit; to

keep you happy and healthy." His eyes narrowed. "That gives me an idea. Hold still, now."

Raising his wand, he muttered something under his breath and watched as the light surrounding Harry split into three distinct auras.

Hermione's eyes widened. "What's that sickly green colored one?"

"That's the connection between him and Voldemort," Moody said.

"From the scar?" Harry asked.

Moody nodded. "Aye, and there's nothing I can do to break it," he said.

"I know. I don't like it, but I've learned to live with it," the young man told him quietly.

"You'll learn to take care of it yourself, once I've finished with you," Moody snapped.

"What are the other two, then?" Ron asked.

Moody cocked his head. "Lily's is the blue one. From the looks of it, she bound his magic as a child. It's commonly found in youngsters who have more than their fair share of accidental magic. Usually it's done to protect the child from harming themselves."

"And the last?" Harry asked, curiously.

"The last reeks of Dumbledore. It's tied in with Lily's binding spell. It's old, put in place when you were still very young," Moody told him.

"Maybe he cast it when he took Harry to the Dursleys?" Ron asked.

"That would make sense. Dumbledore knew my aunt and uncle hated magic," Harry said.

Moody shrugged. "It's possible. There's no way to tell it's exact age. What I don't understand is why they weren't removed when you started Hogwarts."

The trio exchanged looks, but said nothing.

"You might as well remove them," Harry said, turning to face Mad-Eye once more. "I've no need of them now."

"Removing them is simple enough," Moody agreed. "But your magic has been bound for many years. I'm not sure how your magic will react, once free."

Harry drew a breath. "Then I'll have to learn to control it again. What choice is there?"

Nodding, Moody lifted his wand and removed both binding spells. When the auras flickered out and nothing happened, he blew out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. "Well, that wasn't so bad. How do you feel, Potter?" he asked.

Harry's forehead wrinkled in thought. "Fine, I think. My skin is tingling a bit, but..." He stiffened suddenly and groaned. He fell to his knees, then reached up to grab his head.

"Harry!" Ron and Hermione both exclaimed.

When they moved toward him, Moody held up his hand. "Stay back!" he snapped. Turning to Harry, he knelt down. "Potter, listen to me. Potter!"

Harry looked up at the old man and his eyes glowed eerily. "Moody?" he asked.

"Yes, Potter. Now listen. What you're feeling is the force of your power. It's been bound for so many years and you haven't had the chance to adjust to it as most kids would. It's no different than what you're used to controlling, there's just more of it. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, but why does it hurt?" he gasped.

"Once the bindings were removed, it rushed back in a flood," Moody told him. "That was my mistake. I should have removed them one at a time, so you'd have a chance to adjust. It seems I'm becoming as foolish as Dumbledore in my old age."

"It's all right," Harry muttered. "The pain's easing up a bit."

Moody glanced at Hermione and Ron. "Help him into a chair. We have a bit of time to spare, so let's give Potter a chance to recover as much as he can.

Once they got Harry seated, Moody called for Dobby and asked him to retrieve a potion for the boy's headache. After he was dosed, Dobby popped away and they gave Harry time to let the painkillers kick in.

Moody yanked his flask out of his pocket and uncorked it. Taking a drink, he railed at himself for being so foolish.

When Harry leaned back on his chair sometime later and sighed, all eyes turned to him.

"Are you feeling better, mate?" Ron asked worriedly.

"Yeah, the pain's gone."

"I'm sorry, Potter. I was careless," Moody growled.

"That's all right, Mad-Eye. As you once told me, we all make mistakes," Harry said with a lopsided grin.

When Moody growled something about smart ass kids, Harry laughed softly.

"If you're feeling up to it, we should leave," Mad-Eye said.

The trio looked at each other, stood and put their packs on.

"Where are we going anyway?" Hermione asked

"You'll see soon enough," Moody told her as he pulled a rusty tin can out of his pocket and waited.

Two small pops announced the arrival of the house elves. Harry spoke to them quietly for a few moments, then joined his friends, who stood near the ex-auror.

"Grab hold," Moody said. Once they'd done so, he tapped the can with his wand. They were gone in a blink.

A second later, Dobby disappeared.

Two hours later, they landed once again, looking haggard and wind blown. The three teens staggered on impact and Moody hissed as he caught his balance.

"Paris. That was Paris, wasn't it?" Hermione moaned as she rubbed her forehead.

"Yeah, and Beijing, New York and New Delhi," Harry muttered, his eyes closed tightly as he fought his rolling stomach.

"Ice. Everywhere I looked, there was ice!" Ron exclaimed, shuddering against the remembered chill of the arctic.

"Quit your bellyaching!" Moody growled. "Portkeys can be traced. It was necessary to take an indirect route."

"Indirect?" Ron exclaimed. "You took us on a bloody world tour!"

When Hermione gasped, Harry and Ron looked at her, concerned. She was staring at something ahead of them. Turning to see what the problem was, Harry suddenly cursed and pulled out his wand.

"Protego!" he snarled and a shield snapped into place in front of him. He then trained his wand on Moody.

A moment later, Dobby appeared and raised his own shield, protecting all three teens. "You will not harm Harry Potter or his friends!" he said fiercely.

Hermione drew her wand, but looked a bit confused. A large group of people were approaching slowly, many with their hands in plain sight, proving they were unarmed.

Ron stared for a moment. "To be truthful, I don't care who they are," he muttered. "If they can make the world stop spinning, I'd gladly fall to my knees in thanks."

"You're already on your knees, Ron," Hermione hissed. "Get up!"

"I am?" He looked down in astonishment. "Well, hell. When did that happen?"

"About three seconds after we arrived. Now, get up and draw your wand," Harry snapped.

"Er, right." The red head climbed to his feet and drew his wand. "Now what?"

Hermione shook her head, her expression tight with fear. "I've no idea."

"You're slow, Potter," Moody growled. "You should have noticed them as soon as you landed!"

"Yeah, well, I was a little busy trying to keep the contents of my stomach from seeing the light of day," Harry snarled. "Now, do you want to tell me what's going on, or should I just rip your throat out and be done with it?"

Moody laughed. "You could try, Potter, but you wouldn't get the job done." Seeing the teen's face tighten, he shook his head in frustration. "Think, boy! I told you I wouldn't betray you. I promised to help you train and I had to call in a lot of favors to set this up! This is La Tortuga Island, off the coast of Venezuela. Three of the people walking towards us are your other tutors. The rest are Aurors and support staff from the Venezuelan Ministry. The area is protected by a Fidelius charm and I'm the secret keeper. It's also heavily warded and, now that we're here, more will be added so no one can portkey in. With Dobby's help, we can even keep other house elves out."

"And why would the Venezuelan Ministry be willing to help us?" Harry asked, his wand still pointed at Moody.

"Because you're the bleedin' Boy-Who-Lived! I know you hate the title, but in this case, it opened a lot of doors. Jorge Strauss is an Unspeakable in the Venezuelan Ministry and he owed me a favor. When I asked him to tutor you in Occlumency, he jumped at the chance. He spoke to his Minister and I was called in to explain the situation and the need for secrecy."

"That doesn't explain why the Minister would want to help," Harry growled.

"For the honor of training and protecting the Boy-Who-Lived, you dolt! The Minister made everyone involved in the project swear an oath of secrecy. He then swore the same oath to me, with the understanding that, once we're done here, he will be released from part of that oath to crow to the press."

When Harry stiffened, Moody wanted to shake him.

"The press?" Harry asked quietly.

"The Minister will be telling the press that you vacationed in Venezuela and were under the Ministry's protection. He'd like to meet you before you leave, but he won't push that issue if you don't wish to speak to him.

"Every effort has been made to bring in the best people to teach you and keep you safe while you're here. There are Aurors guarding the perimeter of the camp and the entire compound will soon be placed under the effects of a time turner, and that's no easy task. But there just isn't enough time to do what needs to be done without it."

Seeing the disbelief on the young man's face, Moody growled and took a step forward.

"Don't you understand?" the old man asked. "Everyone here knows that you and your friends will be on the front line in this war. But unlike Dumbledore, we intend to ensure that you have the abilities and the courage to survive what's coming!"

"Why didn't you tell us all this before we left?" Hermione asked.

"If you don't know anything, you can't give anything away," Moody told her.

"What, you think Harry would write to Dumbledore and Voldemort, telling them all about his upcoming, fun filled trip to Venezuela?" Ron exclaimed.

Moody met Harry's eyes, then glanced up at his scar for several long moments before meeting the boy's green eyed gaze once more. He cocked his head to the side and raised an eyebrow in question.

Harry nodded in understanding. The Dark Lord had access to his thoughts. He wouldn't voluntarily give anything away, but Voldemort could have found out through their link. He dropped his shield and lowered his wand, though he kept it in his hand.

Dobby, seeing the shield go down, dropped his own, but watched the group of strangers warily.

"What now?" Hermione asked, lowering her wand.

"Introductions," Moody growled as he turned to face the three people coming toward them. The others had stopped some distance away.

Harry's eyes narrowed. One of the three people needed no introduction. "Remus," he muttered.

"Professor Lupin? What's he doing here?" Ron asked.

"Moody said the three of them were our tutors, didn't he?" Hermione asked. "And he was our Defense instructor in third year."

As Ron and Hermione continued to discuss the issue, Harry watched the three approach warily.

Remus looked as he always did, though more tired. On his right was a tall, dignified looking man with short, black hair shot with gray and penetrating, dark colored eyes. To Remus' left was a striking woman of middle years. Her auburn hair was long and flowed freely down her back. She would have been beautiful, but for her overly large ears and sharp, almost beak-like nose. Her blue eyes, however, were calm as she examined the teens.

"Listen up," Moody barked, causing Hermione and Ron to fall silent. "You all know Lupin. To his right is Jorge Strauss, an Unspeakable with the Venezuelan Ministry." The man bowed slightly. "He'll be your tutor in Occlumency and apparation, and be helping me teach you Warding. To Remus' left is Miss Angelique Belmont." The woman nodded politely. "She's a professor at Beauxbatons and will be teaching you Charms. Remus will work with you on Defense. As well as Warding, I'll be teaching you how to fight."

He turned to face the three teens fully. "I know you all have questions, but I'm going to ask you to hold off on them for the time being. I need you three to understand that this isn't a vacation, nor is it Hogwarts. We don't have a lot of time, so you're going to be worked hard. The four of us will help you in any way that we can, but we will not coddle you." He paused long enough to meet the eyes of each teen. "You'll be sore, tired and cursing all of us at one point or another and that's fine. What I need to know before we start is that you'll see this through. Everyone on this island has given up a lot to either teach or protect you while you're here. We all need to know that you'll not give up when things become difficult or tiring."

The three teens exchanged looks, then Harry stepped forward. "I need this," he said quietly. "If I'm to survive Voldemort and his followers, I need whatever training the four of you can give me."

He took a deep breath, then continued firmly. "But you also need to understand something. I've reached the end of my rope. In one way or another, I've been dancing to the tune others have set for me my whole life and I won't do it anymore."

Hermione opened her mouth, but Ron placed a hand on her shoulder and shook his head.

"Let him have his say," the red head told her quietly. "They need to understand where he's coming from before they can teach him properly."

Hermione looked at him, a bit shocked by his insight, but nodded in compliance.

"Others have dictated what I can, will, can't or must do since the death of my parents. The excuse has always been that I'm a child, and therefore can't understand what's happening around me and that the adults in my life know what's best for me. What they don't realize, however, is that my childhood, no, our childhood," he said, waving a hand toward his friends, "ended during our first year at Hogwarts."

He looked at the four tutors before him and sighed. "I'll give you my pledge that I won't give up on the training you're offering. In return, however, I expect all four of you to be honest with us in all things. We're not children any longer, so don't treat us as though we are, or

think you know better than us how we should live our lives. Give us that pledge and we'll work hard and learn whatever you can teach us."

The four adults exchanged glances.

"I have to go with Harry on this one," Ron stated suddenly. "Most of the trouble we've gotten into over the years is due to the so called 'adults' in our lives keeping the truth from us, then throwing us to the wolves."

"I don't know that I'd have put it that way," Hermione said, frowning at Ron, "but both he and Harry are correct."

Jorge Strauss stepped forward. "Honest and direct. I like that," he said with a slight Spanish accent. "I think we shall all get along just fine. I give you all my pledge that it will always be so, as far as your training and your safety are concerned."

When Hermione's eyes narrowed, Moody shook his head. "Think, girl! He works for the Venezuelan Ministry and is privy to State secrets. There are some things that he may not be able to tell you if you ask the wrong questions."

"Oh," she said, looking a bit embarrassed. "I hadn't thought of that. Sorry."

Angelique Belmont stepped forward next. "Unlike my friend, I am not privy to State secrets," she said with a smile. Her French accent was not heavy, and she was much easier to understand than Fleur Delacour had been. "I will be honest and open in all our dealings, not just training. I will answer all of your questions, if I can. If I cannot, I will help you find the answers you seek."

Remus moved forward stiffly and stared at Harry. "I made a mistake. I trusted the wrong man and I hurt you. I'm so sorry, Harry. I'm sorry for not believing you. I'm sorry it took you tossing me over the rail at Headquarters for me to finally see the truth."

Jorge and Angelique looked at him quizzically, but he ignored them.

"I'm hoping you'll come to trust me again, but that has to be your decision. I won't push it. What I will do is pledge to always be honest

with you from now on. I'll teach you everything I can while we're here, and support you in any way possible once we return. If that means going up against Dumbledore, so be it. From this point on, you will always be my first priority, Harry, as you should have been from the start."

"You can't ask for more than that, mate," Ron said quietly.

Harry nodded. "I can't promise you anything, Remus, except that I'll try."

Remus relaxed slightly. "Thank you," he said simply.

After the three teens each gave their pledge to complete the training offered, Moody stepped forward. "Let's get you three settled, then we'll begin."

Authors Note:

Three issues to address this time.

First - No, there isn't a ship. I'm very sorry for all you folks out there who think that Harry's true soul mate is (insert your favorite girl/guy/creature/inanimate object here). If you believe that strongly about it, fire up your word process and get busy! Oh, and make sure to share the URL to your story. We're all looking for good fiction to read!

Second - I can't believe I have to say this again. I can only assume some of you must be new to our work. Now, read very carefully. This is NOT canon. Let me repeat – this is NOT canon. That means that horcruxes, Deathly Hollows (except the cloak, as that came in first year) and the whole stupid idea of love killing Voldemort (a group hug to kill the Dark Lord! Yipee!) will NOT appear in this story.

Third - Some folks can't read or comprehend, it would seem, so let me clarify a few points for you!

a) I never said you couldn't ask questions in your reviews. I said if you want an ANSWER, then head on over to our Yahoo group and ask it there.

b) I never said anything about leaving out encouragement to publish more of the story. This is what I said: "A bit of information for all of you "write more!" reviewers. I'm not going to write any more of this story for one simple reason. It's already complete. And for your next question, there are nine chapters total." See the difference?

c) There would be no point in querying me on the ship, as I've already stated that there isn't one. You'd simply be wasting your time. But hell, it's your time. Query away. As for bashing the ship? What ship is there to bash?

d) See, the thing is, you don't have to review! I don't hold chapters hostage until I get x number of reviews. This story is done and one chapter will be posted each day (maybe more if I have time). That means you can read and not feel obligated to say one little word. Enjoy the story, or go find something else to read if it doesn't entertain you. If that means I don't get many reviews, I won't be upset by it. Does that make me foolish? Well, I suppose it would, if I wrote because I wanted to get as many reviews as possible. Good thing I don't write for that reason, isn't it? However, as soon as the power company and my ISP start taking the reviews for my story as payment for their services, I'll start holding chapters hostage and encouraging people to bash non-existent ships. Does that make you feel better? Excellent!

If any of the above offends you, you know where the exit is. I'm sorry, but I'm not here to coddle you or cater to your wishes. If you want me to craft a story specifically to your tastes, you're out of luck. I write to entertain myself first, my husband second. If some of you can find enjoyment in it as well, that's a bonus, but not the goal of my writing.

But (you knew that was coming, right?) if there's someone out there who wants a unique, original, non Harry Potter story crafted just for them, Bob and I are will to discuss fees. And no, we don't work for donuts. Or peanuts. Or any other edibles. I am, however, willing to discuss toys!

I hope everyone enjoyed the chapter. The next should be up tomorrow!

Disclaimer:

The office door banged open and Alyx jumped slightly, then turned toward it. She smiled brightly as Bob entered, wrestling with their guest, who was covered from head to knees in a burlap sack.

"I got him," Bob told her, panting slightly. "He's stronger than I thought he'd be, too!"

"Nice job, dear. Get him set up, would you?"

Nodding, he dragged their guest into position and removed the sack. There, in the middle of the office, stood Albus Dumbledore. A naked, Albus Dumbledore.

Alyx blanched and closed her eyes. "Did you have to strip him?" she growled.

"Of course! How else were you going to do this?" he asked, puzzled.

"I don't know! I thought maybe we could turn him around and just drop his pants, or something," she said vaguely, waving her hands about.

Bob shrugged. "Same difference."

"Not really. I'm never going to get that image out of my mind," she grumbled, as she walked toward them.

"Who are you people and why have you kidnapped me?" Dumbledore bellowed. "And I demand you give me back my clothing!"

"Take care of that, Bob, while I get the rest of this ready."

Nodding, he reached for the ball gag.

"No!" Alyx exclaimed and Bob froze. "Use the duct tape! If I won't share my toys with you, I'm not about to share them with him!"

He frowned, then cuffed Dumbledore upside the head as the man began to rant once more. "I thought this was the one you used on our readers when we tortured them in the disclaimers?"

"No, that's the pink one," she told him as she pulled something from the closet. "The red one is the one you use on me. Really, you need to pay more attention to details, Bob!"

Sighing and rolling his eyes, he replied as any smart man would. "Yes, dear." Grabbing the duct tape, he then took care of the Headmaster and his annoying rant.

Looking at his wife, he grinned. "Ready?"

"Yep. Bend him over, please," she said with a smile.

Bob reached out and bent Dumbledore over, then taped the man's hands to his ankles. "Go for it!"

Reaching up, Alyx grabbed the chain hanging from the ceiling and attached a glowing, neon sign to it. It hung directly over Dumbledore's ass and read as follows:

Crack begins here!

They stood back to admire their handiwork.

"The arrow under the words was a nice touch," Bob said, smiling.

"I thought so," Alyx agreed. Walking over to Dumbledore, she then removed the tape from his mouth, pulling very slowly and enjoying his pain. Once it was removed, she put a finger under his chin and raised his head so he could meet her eyes.

"Now, Albus, we'll release you just as soon as you say the words," she told him sweetly.

"Never! This story is an abomination and I'll play no part in starting it!" Albus growled.

"Oh, I was hoping you'd say that!" she said gleefully and began rolling up her sleeves. "Bob, grab my bullwhip!"

"Wait! I'll say it!"

"It's too late for that," Bob told him with relish as he handed the toy to his wife. "Can't you see the gleam in her eyes?"

"Bob and Alyx don't own Harry Potter!" Dumbledore shouted. "Start the damn story!"

Alyx's shoulders slumped. "Damn it! Why do people always have to spoil my fun?"

"Don't worry, dear. There's always the reviewers to torture."

Her expression brightened as Bob lead her from the room. "True!"

"Wait! You said you'd release me!"

"Yes, we did. But we didn't say when," Bob reminded the man before closing the door quietly, leaving Dumbledore bent over for the readers to examine – perhaps in more detail than any of them could wish for.

Hogwarts, Headmaster's Office...

Dumbledore rubbed his bald head and winced. His skin no longer stung, but he'd been unable to regrow his hair by any magical means he could devise. Severus had even tried a few potions, all to no avail. Even though he was fully clothed, he could not shake the feeling of being naked.

He'd been calling Dobby for the last two days, but the elf had not appeared with his report on Harry Potter and the goings on at Grimmauld. In frustration, he's sent Winky to Headquarters to find out what had happened.

She had reappeared moments later to state that the house was locked against house elves.

Sighing, he rose from his chair and walked to shelf which held a number of magical items. Finding the one he was looking for, he examined it once more. The results were the same. The monitoring charms he'd placed on Harry were no longer functioning.

He was unsure how the charms had been removed, but he suspected Alastor's involvement. The ex-auror had gone missing,

and Dumbledore could only conclude that the man was at Grimmauld with Harry and Ron.

And Hermione, he reminded himself. When he realized the charms had been removed from Harry, he decided to question Hermione more closely about what had taken place at Headquarters, only to discover from her parents that she had left, returning to be with her friends.

While at the Grangers, he couldn't help but notice the wards placed around the house, wards that had not been there previously. They had the feel of the old auror's work, and Dumbledore suspected he'd placed them around the residence when he'd taking Miss Granger home. They were a good idea, and something he should have thought of himself. The Grangers would be targets, what with Hermione's blood status and her closeness to Harry. He made careful note of the wards left by Moody, just in case he needed them removed at a later date.

Turning away from the shelf, he walked to the window and looked down on the grounds of Hogwarts. He rubbed his head tiredly. He had lost control of Potter and the outcome of the war was now in question. The summer had turned into his worst nightmare. Harry hadn't forgiven him, and was openly defying him. To make matters worse, the boy now had allies Dumbledore had never expected. He knew that Harry's friends would always support him, but the defection of Moody and Lupin was disturbing. It left him questioning his own decisions, something which he could not afford to do.

"No, Moody and Lupin are wrong. They need to be made to see reason, as does Harry. I'm the only one who knows how the war must be fought, and they will be made to see that," he muttered to himself.

La Tortuga Island, Evening...

Ron dropped his quill, closed his book and shoved his homework away with a groan. "We've been here for seven days. We've had our brains stuffed with charms and hexes, shields and wards. Moody's taken great delight in kicking our arses in his fighting class and some of us," he said, looking up and glaring at Hermione, "have splinched ourselves during apparation class. And now...now they give us bookwork? When does it end?"

Hermione scowled at him over the stack of books piled up around her. "You didn't have to bring that up."

"Come on, Hermione," Harry said as he closed his own book and sat back, "Even you have to admit that it was a surprise. You're usually good at everything."

"Except riding a broom," Ron reminded him.

"True," Harry admitted, examining Hermione carefully. "Maybe she just has problems with magical travel."

"That can't be it, mate," Ron said, shaking his head. "If that were the case, she wouldn't be able to travel by portkey or floo as well as she does. Unless she's been faking it." He turned to her then, his eyes narrowed.

"Oh, honestly! How does one fake portkey or floo travel?" she groused, slamming her book closed and leaning back angrily. "You're both being ridiculous! Besides, you're not so great at floo travel, Harry."

"She's got you there," Ron admitted, grinning at Harry.

"Yeah, but I'm not the 'brightest witch of the age', either," he reminded them.

"I hope not. Otherwise, you'd be the brightest and ugliest witch of the age," Ron said, laughing.

Hermione tilted her head slightly and looked at Harry. "Oh, I don't know about that. A bit of makeup, a bit of help on the hair, a nice, padded bra..."

She trailed off and began to laugh at the expressions of horror each boy wore.

"Do I look like a cross dresser to you?" Harry asked, insulted.

"Well, you do wear a dress at school," Hermione mused.

"It's a robe, Hermione! A robe, for Merlin's sake!" Ron exclaimed.

When she began to laugh, Harry grinned. "Yeah, but to a muggle, it would look rather like a strange dress," he admitted.

"No one said muggles weren't strange," Ron sniffed.

"Hey!" Harry and Hermione both yelped.

"What? You're not muggles," the red head reminded them.

"My parents are not strange, Ronald Weasley," Hermione growled.

"Maybe not, but the same can't be said for the Dursleys," Harry said. "Ron may have a point, partially, at least."

"Oh, and wizard's aren't strange? Explain Dung to me, then. Or Tonks," Hermione muttered.

Harry looked at Ron and shrugged. "She's got you there."

"Fine. So strangeness isn't just a muggle thing," he said, giving in. He stretched, then leaned back in a slump. "Now what? I've finished the assignments and done the reading for the coming week. When do we eat?"

Hermione glanced at her watch. "Not for another hour or so."

Ron groaned, then stood up and walked to the window of their dormitory.

The Venezuelans had gone to a lot of trouble to set up the training area. There were several buildings grouped together, most of which were sleeping quarters for the auror force. The tutors were given their own housing, as were the teens, and there was a separate building for meals, set up cafeteria style, where everyone involved with the operation gathered together to eat.

When the teens had first seen the accommodations, Hermione had raised a fuss. The Venezuelans obviously expected her to share a bedroom with Harry and Ron and she wouldn't hear of it. Her loud objections had finally brought in Moody, who'd told her to shut up and live with it. When she'd tried to argue, he's pointed out that Professor Belmont was sharing a room with three men and wasn't

complaining, and she'd finally shut up. Of course, Moody hasn't told her that the woman had objected when she's first arrived, but had solved the problem by erecting several privacy charms around her area of the dorm.

Their hosts had been gracious enough to include two bathrooms in the dormitory, so Hermione solved one of her objections by changing there, rather than in the open. It had taken her three days, much to Moody's annoyance, to solve the rest by raising privacy charms of her own. When he pointed out how long it had taken, the girl had snapped at him, saying it had taken her some time to adjust to her surroundings.

While Moody enjoyed the fact that the girl had spirit, her excuse had been unacceptable to him and had resulted in much growling about constant vigilance and always being on ones toes, no matter the surroundings.

The subject had been dropped when Ron pointed out that they were on the island to learn, after all, and Hermione should look at it as another lesson. Moody had grunted and dropped the issue. He was mollified, somewhat, when he realized later that all three teens had learned to become more aware of not just their surroundings, but also the situations each instructor placed them in.

"So, we have an hour to kill. What should we do?" Ron asked.

"I'd suggest reading ahead in our texts, but I'm afraid of sounding too much like Hermione," Harry told him seriously, though his eyes were dancing.

Hermione shook her head, refusing to rise to the bait. "I have an idea," she told them as she stood up and walked toward her area of the dorm. Opening the drawer on her beside table, she pulled out Harry's notebook and the notes she'd jotted down at Headquarters. "I think it's time to work on Operation Overthrow." She turned around and walked back to the table.

Ron and Harry exchanged a look.

"Operation Overthrow?" Ron asked.

Hermione shrugged. "I was thinking of calling it Out With Demented Old Headmasters, but O.W. D.O.H is a bit of a mouthful."

"So you settled for oo?" Harry asked. "Sounds like someone's reaction to finding dog crap on their shoes or something."

While Ron laughed, Hermione slammed the notebook down on the table. "It's not oo, Harry! It's O.O.!"

"Hmm, a sense of deja vu," Harry said, his head tilted slightly. He looked at Ron.

"Spew!" they both exclaimed, then broke up laughing.

Hermione growled. "Must you bring that up? And it wasn't spew, it was S.P.E.W!" She sat down and tried to ignore them.

"Sorry, Hermione," Harry said, still chuckling.

"Yeah, I am, too," Ron told her. "But you seriously need to lighten up. Look," he continued when she glared at him, "we've worked hard all week and you're about to bring up something that's going to make at least one of us cranky. Laugh while you can."

"Cranky?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Grumpy? Annoyed? Mad as hell?" Ron tried.

"Or all of the above," Hermione said as she sat down and pulled out a clean sheet of parchment.

"Wait, I thought we were picking on Hermione?" Harry asked.

"Humor is fluid. You never know who'll be targeted next," Ron told him, shrugging. "Just go with it."

"I'll remind you of that when it's your turn," Harry grumbled.

"All right, enough fooling around. Let's get down to business," Hermione told them as she pulled out her notes. "I was thinking we could write a letter to Ginny and explain what we're planning. You know she'll never tell anyone, even if she's against the idea."

"She won't be," Ron assured her.

"Probably not," Hermione agreed. "She'll be able to get everyone together at the Burrow and tell them what's going on. We can copy Harry's notebook and send it to her with the letter. That way she'll know why we're going to do this."

Harry sighed and looked toward the dorm window. He didn't like that part of Hermione's plan, though he understood the need for it. The idea of letting everyone read about his past made his skin crawl.

"Harry?" Ron asked, concerned. "Look, mate, if you're truly against this, tell us now. We can try to come up with another plan."

Harry shook his head. "No, you're both right. If people are going to help, they need to know why." He looked at them and shrugged. "I just hate the idea of everyone knowing about my life. I don't want their pity."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Honestly, Harry. You've faced Voldemort six times and lived to tell the tale. Pity? I don't think that's what you'll have to deal with."

Ron's jaw dropped. "Oh, damn, I hadn't thought of that!"

"Language, Ron," Hermione said, almost automatically.

"I thought we broke you of saying that?" the red head grumbled.

"What are you two talking about?" Harry asked, confused.

Ron grinned. "Think of Colin Creevey, Harry. Once the truth is out, he won't be the only one looking at you that way."

"Oh, hell no!" Harry exclaimed, shoving away from the table and standing up. "Are you two trying to drive me nuts?"

"Not purposely, no," Hermione said, shuffling through Harry's notebook. "It's just a nice benefit."

Ron laughed, while Harry continued to rant, pace, and throw his hands in the air rather dramatically.

"Are you two even listening to me?" he finally bellowed.

Ron and Hermione looked at him. "Not really," they both replied, then looked at each other and laughed.

"Oh, sure, laugh. But I'll remind you that both of you were along on most of those adventures. I won't be the only one dealing with the Creevey-like behavior!" Harry remind them as he sat down and slumped in his chair.

Hermione blinked, then looked up at Ron's scowling face. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Me, either," Ron confessed glumly.

Harry smiled grimly. "Not laughing now, are you?"

"We'll just have to stick close to Harry," Hermione said. "They'll focus on him and forget about us."

Ron brightened. "Good point."

"You two are going to pay for this," Harry threatened.

"I'm sure we will, mate," Ron said cheerfully.

"I'm serious," Harry growled. "I don't know when or how, but you'll both..." He gasped suddenly and slapped a hand over his scar.

What has the boy so upset?

"Not again," Harry muttered. "Get out of my head, you freak!"

Potter?

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed, jump up and rushing to his side.

"What's going on?" Ron asked as he stood up.

"Who else would it be, you scaly, worthless piece of shit!" Harry said, rubbing his scar as the pain began to lessen. "I'm busy at the moment, Tom. Now get out of my head!"

Manners, Potter!

Hermione stopped suddenly, her eyes wide. "I'll be right back," she said as she turned away and bolted from the dorm.

Ron knelt down and looked at Harry, concerned. "What can I do?" he asked quietly.

Harry felt a wave of vertigo sweep over him as images flashed through his mind. He held up a hand to Ron.

"You know, Tom, that house of yours sure is ugly. Ever think about a bit of home improvement? I mean, I know you're more snake than human these days, but honestly, even snakes have some standards. You live like a filthy muggle!"

A sense of shock swept through Harry.

You're lying! There's no way you can see my location, boy.

"Not personally, no. I'm only seeing what you're showing me, Tommy. I have to say, I'm not impressed. The Malfoy's live in luxury, yet the most powerful Dark Lord of the age lives in squalor. How...amusing. The servants live better than the master."

Voldemort's bellow of rage made Harry wince and his scar began to throb painfully.

The door to the dorm burst open and Jorge Strauss rushed in with Hermione, Remus and Moody on his heels.

Strauss knelt down next to Ron. "Calm, Mr. Potter. It does not work if you're not calm."

"I know," Harry muttered. "I've been able to keep him from seeing anything, but I can't get him out."

The Unspeakable smiled. "A good start," he said, radiating approval. "Now it's time to put into practice what you've learned this week. Visualize a wall. Place your thoughts, feelings and memories behind that wall, then push everything else out."

"I've tried," Harry told him. "The pain..."

"Is not behind the wall," Strauss finished. "Push it out, Harry."

Closing his eyes, Harry did as the instructor told him. The wall snapped into place in his mind easily enough, but the rest was more difficult.

What are you doing, Potter? The voice sounded angry.

Once he'd done as Strauss had taught him, Harry began to push everything not behind his mental wall out. He could hear the Dark Lord laughing.

That won't work, boy. You're only a child. You have no hope of besting me.

"Yeah? Then how come I'm not dead yet, you bastard!" Harry exclaimed.

Strauss shook his head. "Do not engage," he said quietly. "Simply concentrate on pushing him out."

"He's strong," Harry muttered.

"So are you, Potter," Moody told him simply. "The blocks on your power were removed, remember? Use it."

The pain from his scar increased as the Dark Lord laughed.

I go where I wish, boy. And right now I'm where I want to be; in your tiny, little mind!

Grinding the palm of his hand over his scar, Harry hissed in pain.

Remus knelt down on Harry's other side. "You can do this," he said quietly. He reached up and removed the boy's hand from his forehead. When Harry looked at him, he smiled gently. "You are a powerful young man and you can do this."

Closing his eyes, Harry strengthened the wall he'd built and began to push once more.

"Kick his ass, Harry!" Ron exclaimed.

Harry's eyes snapped open and they shone with a strange inner light. Anger, pain and outrage beat against the wall he'd formed and the Dark Lord shrieked.

This can't happen! What have you done, Potter?

"It looks like I've beat you once again, Tommy," Harry said.

But how? The voice was faint, but full of anger and confusion.

"With any luck, that question will keep you up at night," Harry said as he gave one final push, then slumped back tiredly as the Dark Lord was forced from his mind.

Harry looked at Strauss, then narrowed his still glowing eyes as he felt the older man slip into his mind. "Get out. I've already had one uninvited guest rattling around in there today. I don't want another."

The Unspeakable smiled. "Then remove me, Mr. Potter."

With a growl, Harry strengthened the wall in his mind once more and shoved.

Strauss went flying across the dorm and slammed up against the far wall with a cry of pain.

Harry stood up and swayed slightly, his eyes never leaving the form of the crumpled Unspeakable across the room. "You think to play games with me now? After what I just went through?" he asked angrily.

Ron stood up and backed away.

"Games?" Strauss grunted as he climbed painfully to his feet. "No, that was no game, Mr. Potter. Think of it as a test, if you will."

"A test?" Harry asked quietly. His hands, clenched at his sides, began to glow and power snapped and crackled around them. "I push Voldemort from my mind for the first time, using power I haven't fully mastered yet, and you think it wise to test me?"

The air around the teen became heavy as his power reached out hungrily.

"It was necessary," Strauss said calmly. "I have not faced Voldemort myself. I don't know what sort of power the creature has. I do, however, know my own limits. That you were able to push me out so easily, so forcefully, lets me gauge both your strength and your will to do what you must. Knowing this, I can tailor your training to suit."

"Rein it in, Potter," Moody growled.

Turning to face the ex-auror, Harry blinked, shocked and more than a little confused. The man's hair was standing on end! Glancing around, he noticed Strauss, Ron, Hermione and Remus looked much the same, though Hermione looked like some demented troll doll as her hair stood up in gravity defying proportions.

Seeing the bewilderment on his face, Hermione crossed her arms and glared at him. "As if I don't have enough problems with my hair," she grumbled.

Harry winced. "Er, sorry?"

Remus snickered.

The dormitory door opened and Professor Belmont walked in, then stopped short. Scanning the room, her eyes stopped on Hermione and she raised an eyebrow. "I know several beauty charms that will help with that, Miss Granger," she said kindly, pointing at the girl's hair.

"Thanks, but I think I'll pass. I've already been to the Potter School of Beauty and this was the result," she replied.

"Tsk! Ask for a refund, my dear," Belmont stated. "Obviously the technician did not know what he was doing!"

Remus gave up and laughed. Moody's lips twitched in humor. Ron and Hermione made the mistake of looking at each other. Seconds later, they, too, were laughing. Strauss and Belmont looked on with amused smiles.

Harry scowled at them all. "It's not funny," he muttered. "First Voldemort, then Strauss. Someone let me know when Dumbledore and Snape get here. Then my day will be perfect!" He stalked back to his chair and sat down to sulk.

Strauss tilted his head and looked at Harry. "I'm not sure I like being compared to Voldemort."

Harry waved that away. "You know what I mean."

Hermione sat down across from him, disgruntled. When Ron tried to touch her still standing hair, she pushed him away. "Don't touch it," she snapped. "It's so full of static electricity, it could power London for a week."

The instructors all gathered near the door while Ron and Harry snickered at Hermione.

"What was that, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah, I've never seen you do that before," Ron said. "And I'm not talking about that power surge of yours, either. That I can kind of understand, what with the blocks gone and all."

Harry rubbed his forehead tiredly. "I guess we didn't get to that part at Headquarters, did we?"

Hermione frowned. "This has happened before?"

"Yeah, once. I had an interesting discussion with Voldemort about the merits of writing a Potion essay in Parseltongue."

While Harry explained what happened at Grimmauld, the adults spoke quietly. Several minutes later, Strauss, Belmont and Remus left. Moody turned back to the teens.

"Listen up," he barked. "Potter, you'll be taking an extra class each evening. It's time for you to learn the limits of your magic and how to control it."

"I figured that was coming," Harry said with a sigh.

"It's time for dinner, so get going," Moody told them.

The trio stood, but only Ron and Harry walked toward the door.

"Hermione?" Harry called as the girl headed for the bathroom.

"I need to fix my hair first. I'll be along in a bit," she told them.

"It's dinner, Granger, not a bloody beauty contest!" Moody said.

"Good thing, too," Hermione quipped as she opened the bathroom door. "You'd be a shoe in for last place, Professor. Now, I'll be along in a few minutes." The door closed firmly behind her.

Moody grunted in amusement as he turned and left the dorm.

Ron shook his head as he and Harry walked toward the door. "She's going to make you pay for that, mate."

"I know," Harry replied. "Who knew she was so sensitive about her hair?" he asked glumly.

"What? Are you kidding me?" Ron asked. "Where have you been for the last five years?"

The Burrow, a few days later...

Ginny rubbed her forehead tiredly as she watched Luna and Neville read the last page of Harry's notebook. Dobby had popped into her room three days ago to drop off a package containing the notebook and a general outline of what was being planned for the next school year. She'd been shocked by the plan at first. Once she'd read through the notebook, however, she was willing to help any way she could. While the information about Harry's life had been heartbreaking, her anger over what Harry had been forced to live through had kept any tears from falling.

It had taken her a little longer to get Neville over to her house, but she'd finally managed it. Luna wasn't a problem, of course. But when she'd asked her mother if Neville could come over, the woman had looked at her oddly. Upon seeing it, Ginny had done her best to assure her mother that Neville was just a friend, but it hadn't saved her from 'the talk'.

She shuddered at the memory.

In the end, Neville had been allowed to visit, and they were now out in the backyard. She'd thought to bring them both to her room, but was afraid it would give her mother the wrong idea. Besides, she wouldn't put it past her mother to eavesdrop on their conversation.

"Wow," Neville said quietly, bringing Ginny back to the present. "I never thought Harry's life was perfect, but I never expected this."

"I'm surprised he let Hermione send this to you," Luna added. She twisted a blade of grass between her fingers as she stared off toward the Burrow. "He always seemed to be such a private person."

"He is, but I think Ron and Hermione might have talked him into sending us a copy of the notebook," Ginny told them.

Neville placed the notebook aside and shuffled through Hermione's notes on the plan. "I've never heard of this passive resistance she's talking about, but she explained it rather well. It seems almost too simple, really." He looked up and glanced between the two girls. "What do you think?"

Luna shrugged. "No one would be surprised if I did something like that. Everyone already thinks I'm odd."

"You are," Ginny told her bluntly. "But then, so are we. After all, we're talking about planning a mass revolt at Hogwarts."

Luna grinned. "True."

Neville's brow wrinkled in thought. "We'll have to find some way of getting the DA together and that's not going to be easy."

"Fred and George should be here soon," Ginny reminded them. "They might have some ideas. We won't be able to meet at the Burrow, that's for sure. My mother's already having problems with just Neville being here." She rolled her eyes.

"I wondered why she kept looking at him oddly when he first arrived," Luna said merrily.

Neville grimaced. "I got the same look from my Gran. I don't get a lot of invitations over the summer."

Ginny smiled. "You're welcome to come over any time, Neville. My mum can just learn to live with it."

"You can come to my house, too," Luna added. "After what happened at the Department of Mysteries, my father told me I could invite my friends over any time."

"You told him everything that happened?" Ginny asked.

Neville simply stared at the blond, surprised. He hadn't told his Gran everything about that night!

"Of course," Luna said, shrugging. "He was happy to hear that I had such brave and loyal friends."

"I think that should be the other way around," Neville told her. "We Gryffindors tend to back each other up, even if it means rushing in without thinking things through first."

"Yes, that night could have gone better," Luna said thoughtfully. "A bit of planning wouldn't have gone amiss." She looked at them both seriously. "Harry's a nice boy and he needed help. He was willing to help me learn Defense. It would have been rude of me to turn my back on him."

Ginny shook her head. "I think you have it all wrong, Luna. You're not odd at all."

Luna's eyes shone with hurt. "There's no need to be insulting, Ginevra!"

"I don't think she was trying to insult you," Neville tried to explain.

"He's right, I wasn't," Ginny interrupted quickly. "I thought it bothered you when people said you were odd."

Luna's head tilted slightly as she looked between the two Gryffindors. "Why would I deny being what I am?" she asked simply.

Ginny and Neville looked at each other, neither knowing how to reply.

"Oi! Ginny!"

Turning slightly, Ginny watched Fred and George walk toward them.

"What's going on, baby sister?" George asked as he and his twin joined them.

"Yeah, your note made it sound important, and here we find you lazing around with Neville and Luna," Fred teased.

"As much as we wouldn't mind wasting an afternoon, we did have to close the shop to come here," George added.

Ginny sighed. "I'm sorry about that, but this is important. Sit down, you two."

The twins looked at each other for a moment, then shrugged and sat down next to each other. "What's up?" George asked quietly.

"Here, read this first," Neville said as he passed a piece of parchment over to him. "If you both agree, sign it. If you don't, then we won't keep you away from your shop any longer."

Fred looked at him. "Why so serious?"

"Just read it, Fred," Ginny growled.

"All right, all right. It was just a question," he muttered as he leaned over to read the parchment his brother held.

By signing this document, I swear to never reveal the information I am about to receive to anyone other than Harry Potter or the people undersigned below. I understand that this document is a magical contract and, should I break it, I will spend the rest of my life as a squib, no longer able to do magic.

Hermione Granger

Ronald Weasley

Ginny Weasley

Neville Longbottom

Luna Lovegood

George looked up, his eyes troubled. "What's going on, Ginny? Has something happened to Harry?"

"Your questions will be answered only after you sign the pledge," Luna told him.

"This is a bit more serious than the DA pledge," Fred said, looking at George.

The brothers stared at each other for a moment, then George held out his hand. "Give me a quill," he said quietly.

Once the twins had signed, Ginny took the pledge from them and Neville gave them Harry's notebook.

"Read that first, then we'll tell you the rest," the younger boy explained.

Luna, Ginny and Neville remained silent as the twins read, not wanting to distract them.

When George closed the notebook some time later and looked up, Ginny sucked in her breath and glanced at Fred. His expression mirrored his twin's. Her brothers were furious. Without a word, she held out Hermione's plan for Operation Overthrow.

When they'd finished reading through the plan, the twins were grinning viciously.

"Would serve the old wanker right," Fred growled.

"And Umbridge thought she had problems?" George asked. "When we're finished with Dumbledore, he won't know what hit him."

"Does that mean you'll help?" Neville asked.

"Of course," George said. "But there are a few problems with Hermione's plan. The first problem is gathering the DA."

"I've already started on that," Ginny said. "I wrote Dean after I contacted Neville and Luna. He's gotten in touch with most of the Gryffindors."

"I can get in touch with Ravenclaw," Luna said. "They'll answer me once they know it's about the DA."

"Leave Marietta and Cho out of it," Ginny said quietly. "One's a traitor and the other has rather bad judgment."

Luna nodded. "What about Hufflepuff?"

"I can send a note to Susan," Neville replied. "We study together, so it won't look odd, me sending her an owl. She should be able to get in touch with the others."

"What's the plan if someone doesn't want to sign the pledge?" George asked.

"Plan? We're not going to force them," Ginny said.

"We didn't expect you to, Gin," Fred told her. "But the pledge itself makes it pretty obvious that something serious is going on. What's to stop a DA member from running to Dumbledore?"

"An obliviate," Luna said simply.

"Luna! We can't go mucking about with people's memories," Neville exclaimed.

"Besides, we can't use magic during the holidays," Ginny added.

"You can't, no. But we can," George told them.

When Neville and Ginny looked at him in shock, he shook his head. "Look, Harry's life has been full of people he can't trust. I don't know about the three of you, but Fred and I won't be listed among them. If that means we have to erase a memory or two, so be it."

"George is right," Fred added. "We'll bring the DA members in, one by one. If they don't sign, we'll erase the memory of the pledge and send them on their way. We'll have to come up with a story to fill in the blank, but that shouldn't be difficult."

"You realize you'll be breaking the law," Ginny warned them.

"Says one of the members of the DoM Six," George said, smiling at his baby sister.

"Yeah. What's erasing a few memories compared to breaking into the Ministry?" Fred quipped.

"What's the next problem?" Neville asked quickly, hoping to stop the twins before they gathered steam.

"Where to meet," Fred said. "The Burrow has room, but Mum's curiosity will get the better of her."

"We could use the shop, but I doubt many parents are going to let their kids trot off to Diagon Alley by themselves," George added.

"We could meet at my house. Daddy wouldn't care," Luna said. "As long as we don't go into his office, he probably won't even notice."

Ginny nodded. "That's not a bad idea. Mum knows I'm friends with Luna and she doesn't live that far from here."

"All right," George said. "Let's set a DA meeting for next Wednesday, the 24th. We can close the shop for a few hours, since weekdays tend to be slow anyway. Ginny, you won't be able to receive that many replies without Mum getting suspicious, so let Dean contact the other Gryffindors. He can let you know who's coming. Neville, you get in touch with Susan and let her take care of the Hufflepuffs, while Luna contacts the Ravenclaws."

"If we have it around noon, we could have a nice picnic outside," Luna mused.

"As long as the twins don't bring the food," Ginny muttered.

George laughed. "Nah, we'll bring the butterbeer."

"If anyone has any problems, owl George and I," Fred told them.

"If that's it, I better get back," Neville said as he stood up. "My Gran's having company tonight and she wanted me back early."

As the meeting broke up, Ginny gave the notebook and plans to the twins. She didn't think her mother would snoop, but wasn't willing to take the chance.

Once in her room, she wrote a quick note and called quietly for Dobby. When the elf appeared, she gave him the note and asked him to deliver it to Hermione. The initial stages of Operation Overthrow had begun.

La Tortuga Island, evening...

Hermione lowered Ginny's letter and looked at Ron and Harry. "Well, that's it. The DA's on board."

Harry shook his head. "They all signed," he murmured. "All of them, without question? They're insane."

"You trained 'em, mate," Ron quipped.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry asked.

"It means," Hermione said, glaring at Ron, "that they're loyal to you. And why wouldn't they be? Harry, you're a great teacher and they know they owe their high OWL scores to you."

Seeing he was about to protest, she waved him silent. "Ginny's idea of telling the DA about what happened at the DoM was a stroke of genius. The fact that six students fought against Death Eaters and came out alive gives them courage. That all but one of those Death Eaters were arrested and tossed into Azkaban confirms what they already knew. You're a great teacher, but you're also a leader."

Harry scowled. "Our little jaunt to the Department of Mysteries was a disaster, Hermione. Sirius died, remember?"

"She's not talking about what happened once the Order showed up," Ron said quietly. "She's taking about the fact that we managed to hold our own, with much running and hiding when the occasion

called for it, against some of Voldemort's strongest followers. Before the DA, many of us would have shit ourselves if we saw a Death Eater standing in front of us. You know that. You saw the reaction at the World Cup."

"And however much we may dislike him," Hermione added, "Dumbledore is no Death Eater."

"When we're done with him, he'll never know what hit him," Ron predicted.

"Maybe. But twenty seven people signing a pledge that risks their magic isn't something to sneeze at," Harry told them. "To me, signing that pledge proves I didn't teach them a damn thing."

"Oh, great. It's broody Harry we're dealing with tonight," Ron muttered.

"Stuff it, Ron," Harry growled.

"Knock it off, both of you," Hermione snapped. "Ron, Harry's not brooding. He's just shocked to find out that he has more support than he thought. Because he doesn't think very highly of himself, he's surprised that others do."

"Hey, I'm sitting right here," Harry point out.

"Surprisingly enough, I knew that," she told him calmly. "But it's something you needed to hear. Accept it and move on. The DA will help, and they'll talk to others in their houses when the time comes."

"But..."

"Oh, shut it, mate," Ron said as he opened his Charms book. "You have the support you need to drive Dumbledore mad." He looked up at his best friend, his eyes serious. "Don't push them away."

Before Harry could reply, the dormitory door swung open and Moody limped in.

"I came by to let you know that we found Martinez," the ex-auror said tiredly.

"Where was he?" Ron asked, grinning.

"About three miles out to sea," Moody growled.

"Is he all right?" Harry asked.

"He's cold, tired and seeing three of everything at the moment. The healer's checked him out and says he should be fine, come morning." Moody shook his head. "What were thinking, letting yourself become distracted like that?"

"Distracted?" Harry exclaimed. "I wasn't distracted."

"So you meant to throw him out to sea?" Moody asked.

"Of course not! But you set me against four opponents. I needed to get them out of the way as quickly as possible. I only meant to throw him back a bit. I guess I got a little excited, that's all."

Ron buried his face in his text book and bit his lip to keep from laughing out loud.

"A little excited?" Moody asked incredulously. "We thought you'd tossed him into orbit! For Merlin's sake, Potter, have you learned nothing about control?"

Harry dragged his Charms book towards him. "Of course I have," he muttered. "I haven't tossed you out to sea yet, have I?"

Moody's gruff laughter surprised them all. "True enough, Potter. But you need to keep that same control when up against the enemy."

"Why?" Ron asked curiously. When everyone turned to stare at him, he squirmed a bit. "What does it matter if you toss a Death Eater out to sea? Or through a wall or out a window, for that matter. You've been teaching us to kill or maim the enemy, Moody, so why the sudden caution?"

Moody looked at Harry and raised an eyebrow.

Harry raked a hand through his hair. "I was surprised. When Martinez went flying back so high and so fast, I nearly dropped my wand. While I was busy gaping at him, the other three took me down."

I found myself stripped, tied up and hanging upside down before I knew what hit me."

"Exactly!" Moody growled. "Constant vigilance!"

All three teens groaned. "We know," they chorused.

"You've all got a tough day tomorrow, as we'll be working on something new. Get that bookwork done and get to bed," Moody told them sternly.

"We'd finish a lot faster if you'd be quiet," Hermione commented as she turned the page of her book.

"I think I liked it better when you were afraid of me, Missy," Moody growled.

She looked up at him and blinked wide, innocent eyes. "I'm so sorry, sir. Did I make you angry? If so, I'll spend the rest of the night shivering in my shoes! Think of the nightmares!"

Harry and Ron both snickered.

Moody snorted. "Wise ass kids." Turning away, he limped to the door. "Finish your work and get to bed!"

"Yes, sir!" the trio exclaimed.

"And don't call me that!" Moody spat, then slammed the door closed behind him. Once outside, he looked up at the darkening sky and grinned. He was more pleased with their progress than he thought possible.

The next evening found the teens sprawled, exhausted, on their beds, bookwork, showers and dinner all but forgotten. Moving without pain was an issue, as was the double vision and trembling muscles. Moody hadn't been kidding. The day had been a disaster, from their point of view.

The ex-auror had combined their Defense and fighting classes and had enlisted the help of others. A Potion Mistress who worked for the Venezuelan Ministry had been contacted by Jorge Strauss to brew

a rare potion not normally used in training, as it was proscribed by many Ministries.

Venezuela, however, trained their aurors differently. Criminals used many dark spells, objects and other means to commit their crimes. As such, the Ministry felt it only prudent for their aurors to have experience with such means, and know how to combat them.

The criminal element of the magical world had learned to fear Venezuela's aurors, and rightly so. They were quick, efficient and, when the situation called for it, brutal. Unlike others, they had no need to brag. Their record spoke for them, and many magical governments walked softly when it came to dealing with a country that took no chances and gave no leniency to those who broke the law.

The potion created a simulacrum, or copy, of the person who ingested it that would last for an hour. It didn't take much; four drops of the brew in a small cup of water or juice was enough to produce the simulacrum. The four bottles the Potion Mistress had sent were more than enough to get the group on the island through the summer of training.

After the potion had been explained to them, the trio had watched, amazed, as Moody, Strauss, Lupin, Martinez and two other aurors had each taken the potion and created a simulacrum of themselves. Being copies, the simulacrums had a slightly slower reaction time than the original people would have, but the teens would later admit that they certainly hadn't noticed any delay.

At the end of the hour, as the simulacrums had disappeared, Ron, Harry and Hermione had each spent some time with the healer. He had been able to heal their various cuts, burns, concussions and bruises quickly enough. The exhaustion and aching muscles would have to wait until after they'd climbed into bed. The potion they'd been given would relax and rejuvenate strained muscles and ensure a full eight hours of dreamless sleep.

"Anyone else thinking about skipping dinner?" Ron asked quietly.

Hermione twitched once, then groaned.

"Who could eat?" Harry mumbled. "I'd rather take the potion Healer Delgada gave us and worry about food in the morning."

"No rest for the weary," Remus called from the doorway. "Walking to the canteen will help loosen up those muscles and keep them from cramping before you go to bed."

"Where'd he come from?" Hermione asked hoarsely.

"Dunno. Don't care, either," Harry said. He turned slightly on his bed to glare at Remus and bit back a groan. "Go away."

"No," Remus replied, mercilessly. "You all need to refuel after the workout you had this afternoon, so get up and get to dinner."

Ron grunted as he buried his head under his pillow. "Not hungry," came the muffled reply.

"That's a first," Remus said. "Ron, not hungry? Someone check Hell. I think it just froze over."

"Bugger off!" Ron exclaimed. "I'm not moving."

Remus shook his head. "Come now, it's not that bad," he told them as he walked further into the dorm. "The canteen is serving those lemon tarts you like so much, Harry. And Ron, they have lamb chops tonight."

Harry's stomach growled traitorously. When Remus grinned at him knowingly, he scowled. "Isn't it time for your flea bath, Moony?" he asked sarcastically.

"Fleas on a werewolf? Be serious. They feed on blood, if you'll remember. Have you seen many werefleas around?" he asked, amused.

Hermione raised her head. "That can be arranged, you know."

Brushing that away, Remus drew his wand and, with a few quick flicks, had the teens out of bed. Surprisingly, they had enough energy to pay him back for his rudeness.

Hermione, having learned Kreacher's plucking charm, removed all the werewolf's hair.

Ron, outraged at being dragged out of bed after finally getting comfortable, cast a spell that made Moony's eye teeth enlarge and grow down to his chin.

Harry, seeing what his friends had already done, cast three spells in quick succession. The first caused the nails on Remus' fingers and toes to grow and thicken. The second turned his skin so white he nearly glowed. The third stripped him of his clothing.

With a flick of his wand, Ron disarmed the werewolf, then silenced him.

Hermione frowned. "A naked, albino werewolf? How revolting!" When Remus glared at her in outrage, she shrugged. "Be glad I didn't neuter you."

Remus swallowed nervously.

"Hermione!" Ron and Harry both exclaimed.

"What?" she asked innocently.

"What a horrible thing to threaten a man with," Ron yelped.

While the teens argued over the merits of neutering werewolves, Remus edged over to Harry's bed and grabbed a blanket to wrap around himself.

"What's going on here?" Moody growled from the doorway. Seeing Remus wrapped in a blanket, he raised an eyebrow and turned to the teens. "What did you do?"

"Paid him back for being a prat," Harry told him.

Ron tossed Remus his wand so he could dispel the silencing charm.

"You were supposed to be at dinner ten minutes ago and I find you in here pranking each other? If you have this much energy left after today, we'll just have to up your training!" Moody told them seriously as he limped into the room.

"Wait!" Hermione exclaimed. "You don't understand. That's not what happened."

"Don't care to know the hows or whys," Moody said. "Get to dinner. Now!"

The trio looked at each other for a moment, then bolted for the door. It was amazing what a little adrenalin could do for aching muscles!

Shaking his head, Moody looked at Remus.

Pointing to his enlarged eye teeth, Remus could only shrug. Talking was painful, as his new teeth tried to impale themselves on his chin.

Sighing, Moody turned away. "Let's get you to the Healer so he can fix that spell damage."

Hogwarts, Headmaster's Office, morning...

Dumbledore finished the letter he was writing and attached it to the leg of the waiting school owl. Once the bird had left, he leaned back on his chair tiredly and massaged his temples.

Writing to the head ward breaker at Gringotts to ask for their help was a risk, but he was concerned about Harry and his friends. Grimmauld had not been cleared of all the dark objects the Black family had possessed. And then there was the elf.

Kreacher was not only unstable, he hated anyone who wasn't a Black, and barely tolerated pure bloods. What would the elf do with a halfblood and a muggleborn in the house?

Seeing no other way, Albus had requested the aid of the Goblins to take down the wards Kreacher had raised around Grimmauld. He'd stressed in his letter that an underage child was at risk, but wasn't sure it would be enough to sway them. Goblins, after all, had no love of humans.

Calling for an elf, he ordered tea, then went to work on the start of term forms he'd should have finished days ago.

An owl brought the Goblin's response later that afternoon. The letter, written by Gringotts head ward breaker, Grimjaw, was abrupt and less than pleasant.

Wizard,

That you would ask the Goblin nation to break wizarding law is outrageous and insulting. To pull down the wards on the residence in question, without the rightful owners written permission, is against your own laws. If we were to comply with your request, we would be breaking three treaties and risk the resumption of the last war. As your world is currently at war with the Dark Lord, you can ill afford a second enemy.

Your letter has been forwarded to the Director of Magical Law Enforcement, as per the treaty of 1768, and Ragnok, the Head of Gringotts in Britain, has been informed.

Grimjaw

Chief Ward Breaker

Gringotts

Placing the letter on the desk, Albus looked out the window and sighed. "I think I feel a headache coming on. Wonderful."

His floo flared to life and Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic, glared out at him from the flames.

"Ah," Albus said quietly. "And there it is." Taking off his glasses, he rubbed the bridge of his nose as his headache roared to life. "What can I do for you, Cornelius?" he asked.

"You know why I've called, Dumbledore. Director Bones and I will be coming through now."

"Of course, Cornelius. Of course." Leaning back on his chair, Dumbledore called an elf and requested tea. It was going to be a long afternoon.

La Tortuga Island, morning...

"So, we leave tomorrow morning," Ron said around a mouthful of eggs. "What's the plan for the last two weeks of summer?"

"We'll need to go to Diagon Alley to get our school supplies," Hermione mused as she watched the canteen empty out around them. They'd arrived for breakfast to find that the other residents of the camp were already halfway through the meal. "But leaving the house is dangerous."

"Dobby could get them for us," Harry told her. He reached for the pitcher of juice and refilled his glass. "I'd send Kreacher, but I don't trust him not to bite someone if they annoy him. Or look at him wrong. Or simply look at him, for that matter."

"He's not that bad," Hermione said as she pushed her cereal bowl away.

Ron grinned. "She's got a point, mate. After all, he did pluck Dumbledore."

"Maybe I should send him to Diagon Alley and let him play. I could call it a reward for loyal service," Harry told them.

"Harry," Hermione admonished.

"Now I know how Kreacher feels," Harry muttered as he reached for a muffin. "I never get to play, either."

"Says the man who kicked the Order out of Headquarters," Hermione said.

Ron snickered and pushed his plate away.

"Not going back for third helpings?" Harry asked, feigning shock. "You'll waste away to nothing if you keep that up!"

"Yeah, yeah. Finish breakfast, muffin boy, and let's get out of here. Moody said he wouldn't go lightly on us just because it was our last day." Finishing his juice, Ron wiped his mouth and pushed away from the table.

Finishing the last of his muffin, Harry, too, emptied his glass and stood up. "Ready, Hermione?"

Nodding, she stood up and walked with the boys to the door of the canteen. "Looks like we're the last to leave," she commented.

"I thought we were late this morning, what with everyone nearly finished eating by the time we got here," Ron said.

"Like Moody would ever allow us to be late," Harry scoffed.

"He wouldn't, no," Hermione agreed. "But it does make me wonder why everyone was so early."

Pushing the door open and stepping out, Harry shrugged. "Dunno. Maybe they just want to finish the day and go back to their families. It was nice of them too..."

They were suddenly surrounded by men in black robes and masks. The three teens dove away from each other, firing spells as they went.

The running battle lasted over twenty minutes, and when it was through, two buildings had been destroyed, two were on fire and every black robed man was down, bleeding and unmoving.

"Harry? Ron?" Hermione called out, unable to see them. She'd fired her last shot while hiding behind the rubble of what used to be the canteen.

"I'm fine," Harry called back. "Ron?" He moved then, not wanting to give away his position. He was sure they'd killed or incapacitated all of their attackers, but wasn't going to take any chances.

Ron crouched down next to the last man he had killed. "I'm fine."

"What the hell was that?" Hermione asked.

Taking the mask off the man at his feet, Ron shook his head. "Well, unless I just killed Remus, I'd say it was another of Moody's damn tests. We've been fighting simulacrum."

Clapping was heard from the tree line and the three teens hunkered down, raised their wands and waited.

Moody, Lupin, Strauss and Belmont walked out of the trees, followed by the aurors.

"You're right, Weasley." Moody called out. "They were simulacrum, and the three of you did a decent job. You were attacked by an unknown enemy and kept your heads. You put into practice most of what we've taught you this summer and came out of the fight alive and relatively uninjured."

"Come on out and see the healer," Lupin told them.

Grumbling, Harry stood up and walked around the smoldering ruins he'd been hiding behind. Dusting himself off, he looked at his friends as they stepped out into the open. Taking stock, he realized that they had done rather well.

Hermione had a bleeding gash above her left eye and Ron was covered in nicks and scratches. Glancing down, Harry realized he looked much the same. Several small cuts were oozing blood and his shoulder was throbbing painfully; a gift from a flying chunk of concrete from one of the buildings.

"So, did we pass?" Hermione asked as she approached.

"Any time you walk away from a fight alive, you win," Moody told her gruffly. "The simulacrum's may not have been casting Unforgivables, but we used some spells this time that could have been lethal, had they hit you wrong."

"Nice to know," Ron muttered, scowling. "I always knew teachers were out to kill us."

"Ron," Remus admonished.

"He's not wrong," Harry said wryly. "Quirrell, the fake Moody, Umbridge... Even you, Moony. That will teach you not to forget your Wolfsbane."

"Those were exceptions," Remus told him, grimacing.

Harry winced as the Healer checked out his shoulder. "Maybe, but that doesn't make Ron any less right."

Healing his cuts, the Healer gave him a potion for his shoulder, telling him it was just bruised, then moved on to Hermione.

"What sort of trouble are we in for destroying the buildings?" Hermione asked.

"None," Strauss said. "Everything here is to be destroyed. The Muggles on the island cannot know that this place ever existed. It would raise too many questions."

"Muggles?" Ron asked as the Healer finished with him. "I haven't seen any Muggles."

"Of course not, Mr. Weasley. This area is warded to keep Muggles away," the Unspeakable explained, amused.

"What's next?" Harry asked quietly.

"Training is over," Moody announced. "Get yourselves cleaned up. The Venezuelan Minister will be here in an hour."

Harry groaned. "I'd forgotten about that."

Strauss smiled. "He will not pressure you, Mr. Potter. He simply wants to meet you and wish you luck in the coming fight."

Looking around, Harry sighed. He owed the Minister a lot more than a simple meeting for helping to set up the island and sending aurors. As much as he hated it, if this was what fame bought, he'd live with it for the next few hours and count it well spent.

"You're right, sir," he said quietly. "I owe him - all of you, actually - more than I can say. It would be churlish of me to refuse to meet him."

Hermione grinned. "Then let's get you spiffed up, Harry. You've got a Minister to meet."

Ron snickered.

"Not just Potter," Moody said.

"Alastor is right," Strauss told them. "The Minister would like to meet all three of you. He has heard much about both you and Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger. You will be at Mr. Potter's side in the coming fight and he is much impressed by such loyalty in the face of danger."

Ron groaned. "You'll pay for this, Potter."

It was Harry's turn to snicker.

Grimmauld Place...

Harry awoke with the sun shining in his eyes and groaned. Rolling over, he yawned and thought about going back to sleep.

They'd arrived back at Headquarters around noon and hadn't done much for the rest of the day. Kreacher had been happy to see them and had actually smiled at their return. Once he realized what he was doing, he'd scowled and slunk away, while muttering a few insults just loudly enough to be heard.

Dobby had gone through the accumulated mail before letting any of them touch it. He'd been right to do so, as there had been one letter from Molly, addressed to Ron, that had been a portkey. Ron had opened it after Dobby had pronounced it safe, only to find a blank sheet of paper.

Hermione had a letter from Dumbledore in which he asked her about her return to Headquarters. He'd also accused her, politely, of course, of lying to him about being upset with Harry and Ron the day she'd stormed out of the house.

She had set it aside, not bothering to answer.

Dumbledore had also sent a letter to Harry, urging him to reconsider taking Potions. He pointed out that the class was required if he wanted to become an auror. Harry had crumpled the letter in his hand and tossed into the trash.

Remembering it made Harry growl and he knew he wouldn't be getting back to sleep.

Rolling out of bed, he spent some time with Hedwig, then went to take a shower. Once done, he dried off and dressed quickly as his stomach sent up polite inquiries about the state of breakfast.

Entering the kitchen a short time later, he was surprised to find Dobby at the stove. The elf explained that he'd heard Harry get up and thought he might be hungry.

For his part, Harry wonder why Kreacher wasn't throwing a fit, as he tended to be touchy about anything concerning the house. But Dobby explained that Kreacher hated cooking, and wasn't very good at it, so he'd gladly turned the chore over to him.

Sitting down at the table, Harry did a fair imitation of Ron when Dobby brought the food to the table. He ate faster than was strictly polite, but excused his poor manners by remind himself that no one but Dobby could see him, and the elf wasn't criticizing.

Ron entered the kitchen as Harry was pushing his plate away.

"Morning," Harry said.

Ron grunted, sat down and reached for a plate.

Knowing he would get nothing from his friend until he'd eaten, Harry turned to Dobby and explained that he would need to pick up their school supplies for the coming year. He authorized the elf to take the needed amount from his account to get everything the three of them needed. Seeing Ron about to protest, he explained that they couldn't leave the house safely, and that Ron's parents could pay him back once the term started.

Somewhat mollified, Ron finished breakfast as Dobby collected their lists from the library.

"So, what are we doing today?" Ron asked a bit later as he pushed his plate away and leaned back on his chair.

"Dunno, really," Harry said. Standing, he gathered the dishes and put them in the sink. He wasn't worried about Hermione missing breakfast. When given the choice, she usually ate fruit or toast in the morning. "We've been so busy the last couple of weeks that it seems wrong to have nothing to do."

"As much as I'd like to disagree with you on that, I can't." Standing, Ron took his own dishes to the sink and pulled out his wand. "Might as well get these started."

As the dishes began to wash and dry themselves, Harry looked on, surprised.

Seeing his look, Ron scowled. "What? I've seen my Mum do it enough to know the spell," he grumbled.

"Yeah, but you never offer to clean up."

"Now you see the dangers of boredom," Ron said in mock seriousness. "Come on. Let's get out of here before the refrigerator wakes up."

"Speaking of waking up, I was surprised to see you come down so early."

"Blame Moody. I rolled over, the sun hit my eyes and I panicked. I was sure the old goat would come bursting in any moment, harping about laziness and shooting stinging hexes at me again."

Chuckling quietly, they climbed the stairs and went into the library.

Looking around, Ron sighed and dropped into an arm chair. "We've finished our homework, Dobby's getting our school supplies, all of Moody's books have been read and I'm bored." He looked at Harry expectantly. "Well? You're the host. Entertain me."

"Funny you should say that," Harry replied, his eyes focused and intent.

"Uh oh, I know that look," Ron said, sitting up. "What are you planning and how much trouble are we going to be in?"

Scratching an ear, Harry looked out the window and shrugged. "I'm not even sure it will work. If it does, no one will realize we did it."

"Ah. The best kind of trouble making. The kind where we don't get caught. All right, what is it?"

"I wasn't able to fall asleep last night, so I did some thinking. You remember the summoning charm? The one I used to summon my broom during the tournament?" he asked as he sat down at the table.

"Yeah. What about it?"

"My broom was what, a few kilometers away? That got me thinking about the charm itself and how powerful it could be."

"That would depend on the power of the person casting it, wouldn't it? You had enough power to summon your broom pretty far in fourth year. With your blocks removed, the charm's got to be even stronger, now," Ron pointed out.

"That was my thought. But I'm curious to know how strong and what the limitations of the charm are. I mean, what can be summoned with it? Is there anything that can't be summoned?" Harry asked.

"Anything protected by anti-summoning spells, I'd think. Other than that, I couldn't really tell you. I've never read anything about restrictions with the summoning charm. Hermione might know."

"She probably would, but I thought maybe we could test it."

"Test what?" Hermione asked as she entered the room, a cup of tea in her hand.

"The summoning charm," Ron told her. "Harry's wondering how powerful the spell is and what restrictions, if any, there might be in using it."

"Restrictions? Well, anti-summoning charms are well known, but most people only use them on items of great value. Some people use them on their wands when they know they're going to be fighting. Aurors, for example, almost always have them on their wand holsters," she told them as she sat down. "Why?"

"Curiosity, mostly," Harry said with a shrug. Standing, he drew his wand. "How about a little test?"

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "What are you planning to summon?"

"Nothing bad," Harry told her. "Nothing worth troubling yourself over."

Ron grinned. "This should be interesting."

Raising his wand, he grinned. "Accio Dudley Dursley's computer!"

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed. "What are you doing?"

He shrugged again. "Confusing and irritating my relatives?"

Ron laughed.

"But a computer? Do you know how many muggles are going to see that?" she asked.

"And you know they'll dismiss it. I mean, a flying computer? They'd be locked up in the nut house if they reported something like that," Harry reminded her.

"You don't know that," she told him. "Besides, the Dursleys will know. What else would explain the computer flying out of the house by itself?"

"Hmm. I hadn't thought of that." Looking around, he scowled and slipped his wand back in his pocket. "It doesn't matter anyway. It obviously didn't work."

"What's a kompooter?" Ron asked, puzzled.

As Hermione turned to explain the muggle device, the library window exploded inward, causing all three teens to duck for cover and draw their wands.

"So much for the Fidelius charm," Ron muttered into the now silent room. He'd landed behind the couch, but wasn't sure where the others had ended up.

"Oh, I think it's still in place," Harry replied quietly from across the room. "Hermione? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she said as she stood up from her position behind one of the arm chairs. "What happened?"

"Ron wanted to know what a computer was? Now we can show him, though it's a bit mangled," Harry told her, amused.

"What are you talking about?" she asked as she moved around to get a better view of what he was staring at.

"Simple. My spell worked." Waving a hand at the computer on the floor, he grinned.

Ron joined him and looked down at the thing. "Not very impressive," he said with a haughty sniff.

Harry nudged it with the toe of his shoe and watched as a bit of plaster dust trickled out of the air vents. "Looks like it went through at least one wall."

"What a shame," Ron said.

The two looked at each other, then laughed.

Scowling at them for a moment, Hermione turned away and looked at the broken glass. "May I suggest opening the window the next time you try something like this?" she asked. When they only laughed harder, she repaired the window herself. "Idiots."

"Good thing the bookcase was there or it might have gone through another wall," Ron said, trying to keep a straight face.

"Oh, I don't know. It would have had the added benefit of annoying Kreacher," Harry told him.

"Too late," the elf muttered. He stood in the doorway, holding a tea service and glaring.

"Sorry, Kreacher. I didn't think the thing through," Harry said, not trying to hide his smile.

Grunting, the elf placed the tray on the table and repaired the damage to the bookcase, though he left the computer where it was. With one last, dark look, he popped away.

"I don't remember asking for tea," Hermione said as she walked to the table.

"No one did. Kreacher's been acting more like Dobby lately. It's almost frightening," Harry said as he joined her.

"Don't let either of them hear you say that," Ron told him.

Once they were seated, each with a cup of tea in front of them, they stared at each other.

"Well?" Hermione asked. "Now what? You've proven you could summon an object, something you already knew."

"Yeah, but the distance was much greater," Ron pointed out.

"But we already knew Harry was more powerful than he was in fourth year. We are, too, just not to the same extent."

"And it didn't answer my question about possible restrictions," Harry added. "The computer was just to annoy my relatives."

"I still don't know what you mean by restrictions," Hermione said.

"Simple. Can I summon something, like a body part, with it?" he asked.

"You can't be serious," she breathed. "Harry..."

He looked at her, his eyes intent. "Remember what we were taught. Maim or kill, Hermione. And wouldn't it be better to do so from a distance?"

"Yes, but that's...Harry, it's disgusting!"

"Yeah, but he's got a point," Ron said quietly. "Would you rather face off with a Death Eater or kill him from a distance?"

"I'd rather not kill anyone!" she exclaimed. Seeing their looks, she shook her head. "I know it will probably come down to just that, but using something like this to do it? It just seems so...calculating and cold blooded!"

Ron's eyes narrowed. "It's exactly that. But isn't it better to do so from a place of safety?"

She worried her bottom lip between her teeth for a few moments. "Yes, but..." She shuddered.

"So, what's the next step?" Ron asked Harry.

"Research, I think. Let's find out all we can about the summoning charm," he told them.

"Research? That I can do," Hermione said firmly as she stood up. Moving to the library shelves, she began to browse through the books. "Why don't you check the books Moody brought you, Harry?"

"I don't remember seeing anything in them on the charm, but it wouldn't hurt to look through them," he agreed.

"What about our old textbooks?" Ron asked.

"No, there's nothing in them about restrictions," Hermione told him. "I've read them enough times that I'd remember."

Nodding, the red-head stood up and moved to the nearest bookcase.

They came up for air several hours later when Dobby brought them lunch. He told them that he'd finished picking up their things for school and had put them in their bedrooms. Grabbing a sandwich from the tray, Hermione stood up and said she'd check their new Charms textbook for information.

As she walked out of the room, Ron opened a bottle of butterbeer and leaned back.

"It looks like your idea might work," he told Harry. "Though I'm not sure Hermione or I have the power to summon something from a distance."

"Maybe, but if you summoned something in tandem, casting at the same time and for the same thing, it might work."

"Possibly, though I've never heard of anything like that."

"Me either, but it's worth a try. You could start with something small and nearby and see if it worked."

"We can talk to Hermione about it later," Ron said as he reached for a sandwich. "Either way, it looks like we won't find the answers in a book."

Harry frowned down at the sandwich in his hand. "No, it doesn't. So maybe we should just try it and see if it works."

Ron shrugged. "I'm game. But where do you want to start."

"Internal organs first."

"Do you mind? I'm eating!"

"Sorry," Harry said sheepishly.

"I'll live. Besides, if you're going to go through with this, you might want to do it while Hermione's upstairs," he said, looking at his lunch forlornly. "If it works, I'll only sick the thing up," he muttered as he placed it on his napkin and pushed it away.

Standing, Harry sent him an apologetic look and drew his wand. "Accio Pettigrew's heart!"

Ron blanched. "Harry, open the window!"

"Crap. Forgot about that!" he said. Rushing to the window, he opened and stood back.

They waited for a few tense minutes. When nothing happened, Harry's shoulders slumped.

"I really wanted that to work," he said quietly.

"We don't know how far the rat is from us. It might just take a bit of time," Ron told him.

"Yeah, that's true."

Ron looked at the open window, then down at the food in front of him. "Oh, well. If it comes back up, so be it." Reaching for his sandwich, he began to eat.

Harry joined him a few minutes later.

Hermione walked into the library as the sun was beginning to set.

"There's nothing in the new textbook about any restrictions in the summoning charm," she told them as she sat down and placed the new book on the table.

"We think we found one," Harry said.

"Which book was it in?" she asked curiously.

"It wasn't in a book," Ron explained. "Harry tried to summon Pettigrew's heart."

Hermione gagged. Seeing it, both boys blanched.

"Don't sick up here!" Ron exclaimed.

She glared at him, then turned to Harry. "You tried to summon an internal organ?"

"Yeah, but it didn't work."

"I don't know if the spell can reach that far into the body," she told him. "Even if it could, I don't think something like the heart would be strong enough to break out of the chest wall. If the spell worked, the heart is probably nothing more than a few bloody pieces after being yanked through the ribcage."

"If that's the case, we'll never know if he's dead," Ron added.

"Exactly. If you're going to do something like this, you need to make sure you have some sort of proof that your spell did exactly what you wanted it to."

"And since his heart isn't here, we can assume it didn't," Harry concluded.

"That would be the safe bet. Assuming the spell worked and killed him is a bad idea," Ron said. "I guess that means leaving off the internal organs."

Shuddering, Hermione stood up. "I'm going to get a cup of tea and ask Dobby about dinner. Let's hope he's not serving liver or something."

"Oh, thank you very much, Hermione," Ron grumbled as she left the room. "Way to kill my appetite!"

"You're welcome," she called back from the hall.

"Her sense of humor is becoming a bit more twisted than I'd like," he grumbled to Harry.

"Hey, at least she took your advice and lightened up."

The ticking of the clock on the wall grew louder as both boys were lost in thought. Harry stared out the still open window, and Ron scowled down at the table top.

"Wait," Ron said suddenly, causing Harry to jump slightly. "Hermione said, and I agree, that internal organs are a bad idea. But what about something else? Something external?"

Harry frowned. "Summoning their clothes or shoes isn't going to stop them from casting a killing curse. The Death Eaters don't strike me as being prone to modesty while dueling." His eyes widened suddenly and he looked at Ron. "But, what if..."

"Yeah, what if?"

"Well, there's one way to test it, though I think we'll have to modify the idea a bit," Harry said.

"Modify away, mate," Ron said airily.

Standing, Harry drew his wand and thought for a moment. "Well, here goes nothing. Keep your fingers crossed." Taking a deep breath, he raised his wand. "Accio Snape's Dark Mark!"

Ron looked at Harry incredulously. "His Mark?"

"Well, a one armed Potion's Master wouldn't be much...Oh, hell, I could have solved your Potions problem for you if I'd just summoned his whole arm!" Harry exclaimed.

"Hey, if this works, you can always fix that," Ron told him. He shook his head. "You know, you have a twisted streak in you. I mean, I was thinking of Malfoy's finger or Pettigrew's big toe. But Snape's Dark Mark?"

"If it works, it should be interesting to hear how he explains to his Master why his Mark is gone," Harry said viciously.

Authors Notes:

As the disclaimer pointed out, the crack has begun. Now, you've just had a hint of it here, but I figured a warning was in order. So, is everyone listening? Yes? Good. Here goes!

The background work on this story has ended, for the most part. The rest of the chapters are crack. Lots of humor, with a few darker moments. The whole point is to trash canon as much as possible and make you laugh until your sides split, your keyboards and monitors are ruined because some of you still haven't learned not to drink anything while reading one of our stories, and your animals no longer trust you, as you keep scaring the hell out of them. If you get yourself fired while reading at work, it's your own fault. You've been warned, so no complaints, dear readers!

So, we had a reviewer (Agouraki – you can read it if you want, folks) who reviewed chapter three. And I do have something to say to him. Thank you so much for the compliment! It's awesome to know that you think our writing about emotions is so realistic. Thanks for the review, and have a wonderful day!

Hope you enjoyed the chapter, folks!

~Alyx – who walks away with a bounce in her step and a gleam in her eye,

Disclaimer:

Bob walked into the office, a cup of coffee in his hand, and froze at what he saw.

Alyx sat her desk, staring off into space as she steadily worked her way through a large bar of chocolate.

Noting the chocolate wrappers piled on the desk, he looked around quickly, then cleared his throat to get her attention.

When she looked at him, a brow quirked in question, he shook his head. Glancing at the chocolate bar in her hand, then back to her eyes, he smiled. "Dementors, dear?"

Her eyes narrowed. "PMS," she corrected.

He dropped his coffee cup, ignoring the sound as it shattered and the scalding coffee that splashed against his legs. "Oh, shit!" He looked at the readers. "We don't own Harry Potter! And for God's sake, don't piss her off for the next five days!"

When she growled at him and stood up, he spun around and fled the office.

With a sigh, Alyx sat back down and smiled. That PMS trick never got old.

Hogwarts...

Minerva suppressed a smirk when she saw the Headmaster coming down the stairs. His shiny head reminded her of a picture one of her first years had of a cartoon character named Elmer Fudd. Without his hair, Albus Dumbledore looked like a six foot tall, wrinkled infant.

"Ah, Minerva, good evening. Are you ready for supper?" he asked.

She tore her eyes away from the shine that partially blinded her. "Yes. I've taken a shine to... err... rather, I'm looking forward to it."

Dumbledore frowned. His staff had been making bald jokes lately and it was getting on his nerves. He really didn't need to be reminded of his predicament. He was just thankful that Poppy had

kept the healer/patient confidentiality, otherwise the staff would know he was completely bald, everywhere. As it was, he still didn't like the fact that, in the middle of her examination, she'd excused herself, went into her office and laughed for several minutes. She hadn't even bothered to use a silencing charm!

He sighed and pushed open the door to the Great Hall. As he did, a scream echoed throughout the castle and they both turned suddenly to look down the corridor. Something flat and dripping flew past them at high speed. It hit a window and shattered it on its flight away.

"Albus?" gasped Minerva.

"I will go investigate," he assured her.

She nodded and turned to enter the Great Hall. Pausing in the doorway, a twinkle in her eye, she turned slightly. "Stick to the bald facts, Headmaster!"

Grimmauld...

Hermione entered the library a few minutes later with cup of tea and sat down at the table. "Dobby says dinner will be ready in about an hour."

"No liver?" Ron asked.

She smiled. "No, he's fixing chicken."

"I like chicken."

"Is there anything you don't like?" Harry asked as he sat down.

While Ron glared at Harry, Hermione took a sip of tea and wondered if it would be worth the effort to go through the library books again after dinner.

Movement caught her eye and she glanced toward it in time to see something flying straight at her. Dropping her cup, she ducked and drew her wand in time to hear something wet hit the wall behind her.

The boys let out triumphant shouts and she turned quickly to see a mass of bloody tissue sticking to the wall and gagged.

"Oh, God! Pettigrew's heart?" she exclaimed, moving away quickly.

"Nope!" Ron shouted. "We took your advice and gave up on internal organs."

"What you're looking at, my dear Hermione, is Severus Snape's Dark Mark!" Harry said proudly.

"His Mark? You summoned... But I don't think... Oh, I'm going to be sick!" She gagged twice more, then bolted from the room.

While Ron jumped around in celebration, Harry stared at the thing slowly sliding down the wall.

"Are we sure that's what it is?" he asked.

"What else could it be?" Ron asked happily.

Shrugging, Harry placed several napkins left over from lunch on the table, then levitated the grotesque mass onto them. "It looks like skin, but I don't see the Mark."

Ron joined him and wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Try turning it over."

"Er, right." Swallowing heavily, he flipped it over with a flick of his wand.

There, in all its bigoted, hate filled glory, was the Mark.

"Snape's going to be pissed," Ron mumbled. "So, now what?"

"Kreacher!" Harry called. When Ron looked at him questioningly, he sighed. "I know it's gross, but we might need it later."

"Nasty Master called for Kreacher?" the elf asked from behind them.

"Yes," Harry said, turning to face the elf. "Can elf magic preserve something like this?" he asked, pointing at the thing.

Peering over the edge of the table, Kreacher examined the flesh.
"Yes. What you ask is a simple thing."

"Good. Preserve it, then put it in the attic somewhere it will be safe."

Nodding, the elf scooped up the bloody mass and popped away.

Placing a hand on Harry's shoulder, Ron looked at him seriously, though his eyes were filled with mirth. "You are a sick and twisted individual, Mr. Potter."

"Get off," he said, shrugging Ron's hand away.

"Oh, come on, Harry! As disgusting as that thing was, you've proven it works! Just think what you could do! You could summon Malfoy's hair. Or Pettigrew's tail, assuming he's in rat form. Or Belletrix' legs!"

"Or Voldemort's wand," Harry exclaimed.

"Wouldn't that be protected?" Ron asked.

"I don't know. Would you protect something if no one was around? I mean, every time Voldemort's entered my mind this summer, he's been alone. Why would he protect his wand? People don't generally summon things from a distance, do they?"

"Well, no, but..."

"It doesn't hurt to try."

Ron sighed. "No, it doesn't. Okay, Harry, summon the blighter's wand."

Nodding, Harry did exactly that.

Hermione entered the room as he was tucking his wand away and looked around cautiously. "Is it gone?" she asked.

"Yeah. I had Kreacher take it away and preserve it," Harry told her.

"Preserve...like jam? Oh, God!" She slapped a hand over her mouth and bolted from the room again.

Ron watched her for a moment, then turned to Harry. "You need to stop doing that."

"What? I had it taken away, didn't I?" he asked innocently.

"Yeah, but if she throws up much more, she's going to gag on her shoes."

"This from the guy who barfed up slugs?"

Ron glared. "But we don't talk about that, remember?"

As Harry began to snicker, something flew in through the window, skidded down the table and hit the chair on the other end.

"No way!" Ron exclaimed as he rushed over to the chair.

There, on the cushion, lay a wand.

"Merlin," Harry breathed as he looked down at it.

"Are we sure it's Voldemort's?" Ron asked in awe.

Harry nodded. "I'd know it anywhere."

Ron reached for it, then jerked back suddenly. "Is it safe?"

"It's just a wand," Harry told him as he picked it up. "I don't trust Kreacher with this."

"Maybe Dobby?"

Nodding, Harry called the elf.

Dobby appeared wearing an apron and looked around curiously. "Harry Potter needs Dobby?"

"Yeah. Can you hide this away for me?" Harry asked, holding out the wand. "And make sure it can't be summoned?"

Dobby looked curiously at the wand for a moment, then jerked suddenly and began to tremble. "Dobby always knew Harry Potter

was a great wizard! He has summoned the Great Grumpy One's wand!"

"Er, yeah, if by that you mean Voldemort," Harry said, a bit confused. "So, can you do as I asked?"

Nodding vigorously, the elf took the wand from Harry, then looked up at him in awe. "I will protect it."

"Thanks, Dobby."

When the elf popped away, Harry looked at Ron. "I think we might be skipping dinner tonight."

"Why is that?"

"Because I have a rather disturbing idea."

"Umm, Harry? You summoned Snape's Dark Mark. I think you've moved beyond disturbed."

"Oh, I haven't gotten started yet. Tell me, do you know any healing spells?"

Ron blinked. "Ah, no. Why?"

"I have a plan."

"I hate it when you say that."

"Stick with me here. If this works, it could solve my biggest problem," Harry told him.

Ron shrugged. "I'm not going anywhere, mate. What are we doing this time?"

"Well, as you don't know any healing spells, we'll have to rely on either Hermione or one of the elves."

"Er, I think Hermione's out of action at the moment."

Nodding, Harry thought quickly. "I think I'll use Kreacher for this one."

"This one what?"

Waving him silent, Harry called for Kreacher.

The elf appeared quickly. "The flesh has been preserved as Master commanded."

"Excellent. Thank you, Kreacher," Harry said. "Now, I have a question. Do you know any healing magic?"

"Of course. All house elves know how to heal. At least those serving pure blood families do."

"Why would that make a difference?" Harry asked.

"Because house elves care for the children in many pure blood families," Ron replied.

"The red haired one is right," Kreacher said. "We know how to heal many injuries, including those that are life threatening."

Harry smiled. "This might just work."

"What might work?" Ron asked in frustration.

"Kreacher," Harry said, ignoring his friend's question. "Do we have any blood replenishing potion in the house?"

"The bald, muggle-loving Headmaster kept the house fully supplied," Kreacher confirmed.

"Go get all of them and bring them to the library as quickly as you can," Harry said.

The elf popped away with a crack.

"Would you please tell me what this is all about?" Ron growled. "You're starting to annoy the hell out of me!"

"Think about it, Ron! I've summoned Snape's Dark Mark. I've got Voldemort's wand!"

"Yeah, but healing? And blood replenishing potions? You'd only need that if you were going to...Oh, shit! You're going to..."

Harry smiled viciously. "Exactly!"

"But you're supposed to..."

"Yeah, I know. But I'm tired of doing what I'm supposed to. That's what started all of this, remember? Now I think it's time to have a little fun."

Ron fell into a chair at the table and stared at his best friend for several long moments. The smile that finally twisted his lips was almost feral. "This should be interesting."

Kreacher popped back in and set a basket down on the floor. "I got them all, Master. There's enough potion in the basket to replenish the blood of four people."

"We might not need all of it, but I'm sure we'll use plenty," Harry told him. "Now, listen carefully, Kreacher. This is what I'll need you to do."

Several minutes later, he looked at Ron, who took a deep breath and nodded.

"Go for it, Harry."

"Kreacher?"

"I'm ready, Master," the elf told him, his eyes gleaming eagerly. "And if I forget, know that Kreacher thanks you for allowing him to play!"

Nodding, Harry took a deep breath and raised his wand. He cast five summoning spells in rapid succession, but did not put his wand away.

Ron had drawn his own and waited tensely. "I hope this works. At least, I think I do."

"Of course you do. This solves all our problems," Harry told him.

"Not quite, mate," Ron said seriously. "Not if you actually want a life of your own."

Sighing, Harry nodded. "I know, but that can come later."

"How long do you think it will take?"

"I don't know."

"Er, Harry? Maybe we should have warned Hermione."

"Why? She can't possibly have anything left to throw up."

"No, but I wouldn't put it past her to hex us to death when she finds out. And that's assuming she doesn't come back in the middle of this."

"Huh. I hadn't thought of that. Too late now, I suppose," he said casually, though his shoulders were starting to ache with tension.

"I'll remind you of that when we're searching for your balls," Ron said with a tense grin.

"They're coming," Kreacher said, his voice distant.

"What? How do you know?" Harry asked, his eyes glued to the window.

"Kreacher can feel when magic approaches. He is tied to the wards around the house. They come! Prepare yourselves!" His stance widened, as if bracing for an impact, and he held his hands up, ready to strike.

Ron jumped out of his chair and trained his wand on the window. "I hope you know what we're doing, Harry."

"Me too."

"What the hell are you two doing now?" Hermione exclaimed from the doorway.

Ron spun around so suddenly that he nearly lost his balance. "Oh, fuck me, Hermione! Not now!" Turning back to the window, he raised his wand and glanced at Harry. "We're screwed," he muttered.

"Later," Harry growled. "Hermione, either pull out your wand or leave!"

Something streaked through the window and slammed against the wall. Hermione shrieked and drew her wand. "More body parts? You two are in so much shit when this is over!"

"The wall!" Harry blurted. "Cushion the wall quickly, Hermione!"

With a violent swish of her wand, she did as she was asked, then turned to face the window again just as something else flew in. Biting back another scream, she looked closely at the thing as it hit the wall and hissed in disgust. "An arm? You summoned a bloody arm?"

"It wasn't bloody until after the summoning," Ron told her.

"Stuff it, Ron. I swear, when I'm done with the two of you, you'll wish you'd never been born! Arms? You're both insane."

"Not just arms," Harry told her.

Something flew threw the window and hit the wall.

"Legs, too," Ron said. "One more, then the main event arrives."

"What main event?" Hermione exclaimed angrily.

"Later," Ron and Harry both growled.

The second leg shot through the window and smacked gently into the wall across the room

"This is it," Harry said.

Growling, Hermione tensed herself and trained her wand on the wall where the next thing through the window was sure to land. She still had no idea what was going on, but a cushioning charm for arms and legs seems stupid and a bit disturbing to her. After all, Harry

had preserved a mass of flesh. There was no telling what he was planning to do with a bunch of limbs!

A distant shrieking could be heard through the window. Hermione's eyes widened and she felt the blood drain from her face.

"You didn't! Killing someone is one thing, but this?" she gasped. "You're both insane!"

"No killing!" Harry shouted. "Stunning only!"

The shrieking had grown closer with each passing second until it and its source shot through the window and hit the cushioned wall with a loud smack. It bounced off the wall and fell to the table as Harry's spell flew, hitting the thing in the chest.

The shrieking stopped and Kreacher was moving. He climbed onto the table and with quick, efficient and incredibly vicious movements, he stopped the thing from bleeding by cauterizing the wounds with fire. The smell of burnt flesh filled the air and, for the third time that night, Hermione gagged and fled the room.

But she'd gotten a good enough look at the thing on the table to realize exactly what her best friends had done. It hadn't changed her mind, either; they were both insane!

Harry picked up the basket of potions and took them to Kreacher. "How do we do this if he's unconscious?"

"Elves must be able to administer potions, no matter the circumstances," Kreacher told him as he uncorked several bottles and lined them up. Then, placing his hand over the throat of the person on the table, he picked up a bottle and looked at Harry. "Normally another elf would help Kreacher with this. You need to open his mouth."

Nodding, Harry put his thumb on the man's chin and pulled it down.

Tipping the bottle up, Kreacher monitored his patient carefully. The hand he'd placed over his patient's throat glowed brightly as he manipulated the muscles, causing the man to swallow rapidly.

Several bottles later, Kreacher removed his hand from his patients throat and sat back. "He will live."

Ron and Harry glanced at Kreacher, then stared at each other.

"It worked?" Ron asked.

"It certainly looks that way," Harry said quietly.

"But what do we do with him?"

"I hadn't really thought that far ahead, to be honest."

Kreacher put the empty bottles in the basket and climbed down off the table. "If the Master would allow, Kreacher has an idea."

"What is it?"

Harry and Ron listened to the elf, occasionally interrupting him with bouts of laughter. When he was finished, both teens grinned.

"An excellent idea, Kreacher. It solves several problems his...arrival caused," Harry praised.

The elf looked up at Harry, his eyes bright with respect. "Kreacher is proud to know he is owned by such a strong wizard. He was a fool to doubt the Master." He bowed low, then looked up once more. "I will be back with the necessary item."

With that, he disappeared.

"Explain," Hermione said hoarsely, leaning heavily against the door frame.

Harry's brow wrinkled in concern as he looked at her. She was pale and sweaty and her hair hung limply, for once. "Are you all right?"

"Maybe you should sit down," Ron added.

Pushing away from the doorway, she waved away their concern and wobbled toward them. "What were you thinking?"

"Thinking? Er...I was thinking I just solved a problem," Harry told her.

"And created a boatload more!" she exclaimed.

"I don't see how," Harry said.

"Me either," Ron added. "It's not like anyone will know what we've done. At least, not until Harry's ready for them to."

She looked at them incredulously. "You don't think anyone going to notice that the Dark Lord is missing?"

Ron and Harry looked at each other for a moment, then turned back to her and shrugged.

"It's not like one of his minions is going to drop into the DMLE and file a missing persons report on him," Harry said, grinning.

Dobby appeared with a pop. "Dinner is served!" he announced proudly.

"Oh, God. Not again," Hermione gasped as she clutched at her stomach.

"You can't possibly have anything left to throw up," Ron said with a roll of his eyes.

She drew her wand so fast she startled both boys. In a blink, she had Ron disarmed, silenced and vomiting slugs the size of large eels.

Harry's nose crinkled. "How did you do that? Last time, the slugs were rather small."

"Because he cast with a broken wand," Hermione muttered as she watched the red-head gag and vomit.

Ron's knees gave out and he hit the floor as another slug emerged.

"I hope he doesn't choke," Harry said, concerned.

Dobby, who'd managed to take in the damage to the library, looked up at Harry. "Will you be wanting dinner tonight?"

"We'll be along shortly," Harry told him.

When the elf left, he glanced at Ron, then looked at Hermione. She was pale and a bit shaky, but she was watching Ron with a great deal of satisfaction.

"You know, I think I'll talk to Dobby about serving eel tomorrow night," he told her.

She clutched her stomach and grit her teeth. "Bastard," she growled before running from the room.

Dinner was a quiet affair.

Hermione was no longer nauseous, thanks to a potion Dobby had brought her, but she still hadn't touched any food. She sat with them at the table, drinking tea occasionally and watching both boys.

Harry had removed the spell Hermione had cast and Ron was no longer vomiting slugs. The slugs hadn't killed Ron's appetite, and he was currently shoveling food into his mouth at his normal pace.

Harry ate slowly, pausing now and then to look up at the ceiling thoughtfully.

"I have a question," Hermione asked suddenly. "You summoned the Dark Lord's limbs, then his body. How did he survive the trip?"

Both boys looked at her oddly and she sighed. "There are arteries in the limbs. He should have bled out and died before he arrived."

Harry shook his head. "You're forgetting that he's not human anymore, Hermione. Not really. The rebirthing fluid in the graveyard contained Wormtail's hand, a bone from Voldemort's father and my blood, along with some other ingredients I'm not sure about."

Hermione frowned. "Maybe it was the addition of your blood that helped him survive his limbless jaunt to Headquarters, then."

"What makes you think that?" Ron asked.

"Harry survived the killing curse as a toddler. Having one's limbs ripped off has got to be a piece of cake in comparison," she said, shrugging.

"My, aren't we blasé, all of a sudden," Harry muttered.

"What? You have a better explanation?" she asked.

He thought about that for a moment. "Magic?" Seeing her look, he cringed back. "We'll go with your explanation," he said, holding up both hands to ward her off.

She sniffed and turned back to her tea.

Ron's fork paused halfway to his mouth and he looked at Harry. "Do you remember how you blew up your Aunt Marge?"

Harry blinked. "Um, no, not really. I was angry, but hadn't meant to do anything like that. Why?"

"I was just thinking. We could tie a string to him, then inflate him. Imagine walking around Diagon Alley with your very own Voldemort balloon."

Harry began to choke on his laughter and he pushed his plate away. "Brilliant!"

"Ron!" Hermione exclaimed. "Would you be serious?"

"Why?" he asked, looking at her curiously. "Harry's managed to solve the biggest problem he had. It's not like the Dark Lord can hurt him now. He doesn't have his wand. Even if he did, he has no way to hold it."

"Do you have any idea how many laws have been broken tonight?" Hermione asked angrily. "The Ministry is infested with Death Eaters! Do you honestly think they'll look kindly on us for what we've done?"

"We could always summon them in the same manner," Ron joked. "They could be company for Voldemort."

Harry's laughter grew louder and he leaned weakly against the table.

"Would you stop that?" Hermione growled. "This is serious!"

Sliding sideways, Harry fell out of his chair and hit the floor with a thud.

Ron and Hermione both stood up and looked at him in concern.

"You okay?" Ron asked.

Harry looked up at them. Tears of mirth slid down his cheeks and he sucked in a breath. "Merlin, don't you see? If we could do this to the Dark Lord himself, his Death Eaters don't stand a chance." He closed his eyes for a moment, then laughed once more. "I'm free."

Ron grinned. "Yeah, mate, you are."

Hermione stared at Harry for a long moment, then her shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry, Harry. I wasn't thinking of what this would mean for you."

Waving that away, Harry climbed back into his chair. "That's all right. Ron had some warning about what I was doing. You walked into the middle of it."

Sitting down once more, she shook her head. "Maybe, but that's not an excuse."

Ron gathered up the dishes on the table and sent them toward the sink with a flick of his wand. "Don't worry about it, Hermione. You were shocked and off-balance."

"You were also right, in one way," Harry said. "Now that it's over, I'm not sure what to do with him."

"The prophecy says..." Hermione began.

Harry scowled. "Yeah, yeah, I know what it says. But I'm no more willing to subject myself to the whim of prophecy, than I am to bow to Dumbledore's machinations. I'm not willing to kill a man who is no threat to me. He can't hurt me any longer. Killing him now makes me a murderer."

Ron set the dishes to washing and sat down. He looked at Hermione for a moment, then turned to Harry. "So, what now?"

"Who knew I'd be spending the last two weeks of summer living in a house with my two best friends and the Dark Lord," Hermione muttered.

"The Dark Lord?" Harry asked, his eyes bright with laughter. "You mean the Dark Torso, don't you?"

Ron's jaw dropped and he stared at Harry. "The Dark Torso," he mumbled, testing it for himself. "Blood brilliant."

Hermione lay her head on the table and her shoulders shook slightly. "The Dark Torso?" she choked. "Merlin, he'd kill you for that...if he had arms."

"Or legs," Ron added, then began to laugh.

"Or his wand," Harry said, watching them both and smiling.

Kreacher popped into the kitchen and bowed to Harry. "Master's guest is as comfortable as Kreacher can make him. Kreacher had to stuff pillows into the trunk to keep Master's guest upright, as he kept falling over on his face." He then grinned at the now hysterical teens and danced a small jig. "Kreacher has never enjoyed himself this much before."

Calming himself, Harry straightened and smiled down at the elf. "I'm glad you're having fun. His care will be your responsibility now. No one outside this house is to know he's here. Not even Moody," he warned.

"Yes, Master. Kreacher will take care of everything. If Master has no objections, Kreacher will move his things into the attic now."

"I have no objections. Thanks, Kreacher."

"Master is welcome," Kreacher said, bowing.

Once the elf left, the three teens looked at each other again.

"Well, I suppose we have to come up with some sort of plan," Harry said. "We can't leave Kreacher in charge without directions."

"We also need to get in touch with Ginny," Hermione added.

"Why?" Ron asked curiously.

"To let her know Operation Overthrow is no longer needed."

"Why wouldn't it be needed?" Harry asked.

"Because the Dark Lord has been neutralized," Hermione said.

"But Dumbledore hasn't been," Ron told her. "As far as he knows, Voldemort is still out there, as dangerous as ever."

"Yes, but once Harry announces that the Dark Lord has been..." She trailed off as Harry shook his head.

"But I'm not going to announce anything," he said. "Dumbledore will insist that I kill Voldemort to fulfill his stupid prophecy, and I have no intention of doing so."

"You're going ahead with Operation Overthrow, then?" she asked, puzzled.

"It's the only way to make sure Dumbledore understands that I won't let him meddle in my life any longer." His lips twitched slightly. "Besides, I think I'm entitled to have a little fun."

"Harry," Hermione began.

"Wait. Hear me out," he said. "Dumbledore may have been a great Headmaster at one time, but that time is over. Look at everything we've been through. He obviously isn't very concerned about the safety of his students. Our education doesn't seem to be a priority for him, either. If it was, Snape, Trelawney and Binns would have been replaced ages ago."

"That's not fair, Harry," Ron said seriously. "Binns is very good at teaching us all how to nap in class."

Harry laughed. "True."

Hermione fought a smile. Even she had problems staying awake in History of Magic. "I understand what you're saying, and agree with most of it. But what about the fifth and seventh year students? Those tests are very important."

"We'll have to meet with the DA when we school starts. Maybe we could exclude those students who have tests this year," Ron suggested.

"Possibly, but if Operation Overthrow is successful, the teachers will be so distracted, they won't be doing their best for the students," Hermione pointed out.

Harry raked a hand through his hair. "I don't know. Maybe, if we do this right, the Board will offer some sort of compensation for the testing students."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked.

"Well, if we manage to get Dumbledore tossed out, the Board may look at the circumstances and reschedule their tests or something."

"Do you really think it's wise to hinge their future on a maybe?"

"No," Ron told her. "But I do think they should make their own choices. After all, the objective of this hasn't changed; Dumbledore needs to go. Let's make sure they understand that this could affect their test scores and let them make up their own minds."

She sat back on her chair and nibbled her lower lip. "That might work."

"All right, now that we have that settled," Harry said. "What do we do with our guest while we're at school?"

"Why can't Kreacher take care of him?" Ron asked.

"He could, but he'll need some sort of instructions, I think. There's no telling what he'd do on his own."

"There's not much that needs to be done, really," Hermione said. "Feed him and keep him clean and quiet."

Harry scowled. "Yeah, well, I'm not sure I like the idea of feeding and caring for the Dark Torso. He's caused me nothing but grief. If I were a bit more sadistic, I'd order daily torture. Unfortunately, I can't justify doing that to someone who can't defend himself."

Hermione exhaled, unaware she'd actually been holding her breath.

"You know, Muggles sometimes study the criminally insane. Too bad we couldn't do something like that with him," Harry mused. "Handing him over to a lab for testing would be amusing."

Ron's eyes widened. "Ah, Harry? There might be something we can do."

"What do you have in mind?"

"The twins," the red head told him.

Hermione's brow furrowed. "What about them?"

Harry blinked several times, then grinned. "They're always looking for test subjects, aren't they?"

"Now wait a minute," Hermione began.

"Yes, they are," Ron replied, ignoring Hermione as she began to sputter. "And just think. The greatest Dark Lord of all time being reduced to a test subject for pranks and jokes? The darkest menace to our world, being responsible for product safety? Come on! What's not to like?"

Hermione opened her mouth, intent on blasting both boys into next year, but all that came out was a wheeze. When they looked at her oddly, she coughed to clear her throat and tried again. She giggled instead.

Ron grinned and looked at Harry. "She's in! So, what do you think?"

"I think there's something slightly twisted about you," Harry said, shaking his head. "It's morally wrong, bordering on contemptible, and quite probably illegal. But the only question I find myself able to ask is; how long do you think it would take the twins to get here?"

Ron laughed. "A note from you would bring them here about five minutes after they received it."

Harry looked at Hermione. "Well?"

She shook her head. "God, I used to be such a nice, law abiding girl. Now I find myself hoping the twins will take pictures during their product tests."

The trio looked at each other and began to laugh.

Hogwarts...

Dumbledore sat on the couch in Snape's private quarters, pinching the bridge of his nose. He was tired and had no idea how to solve the problem he was now faced with.

They'd managed to stop the bleeding on Snape's arm and partially heal the injury without having to call on Poppy's aid. The mediwitch would have asked questions that neither man was willing to answer.

Snape now sat in an armchair across from him, a brandy glass in his hand. He sipped from it occasionally, but his eyes never left the Headmaster.

Dumbledore looked at his Potions Professor and took a deep breath. "You can feel nothing from Voldemort?"

Snape shook his head. Since the Dark Lord's rebirth, every Death Eater had been able to feel his presence through the Mark. With it gone... Snape closed his eyes. "Albus, the next time he summons me, he will think I am deliberately ignoring him."

"And it's not as though you could inform him that the Mark was removed."

"Ending my life as a pile of goo at the Dark Lord's feet was not really in my plans," Snape agreed. "What am I to do now? How did this happen?"

"I do not know how it happened, Severus, but one thing is clear." Dumbledore's eyes bore into Snape's. "From this moment on, you are not to leave the Hogwarts grounds."

Grimmauld...

After breakfast the next morning, Harry sent Hedwig off with a note to the twins, then called for Kreacher. When the elf appeared, he asked about their guest.

"I had to leave the silencing charm on him," the elf explained. "He wouldn't stop screaming. He finally fell asleep a few hours ago."

"Excellent. The Weasley twins will be here this morning. I want you to modify the wards so they can come in."

Kreacher scowled. "More red heads?"

"Yes, but you'll like them."

"Kreacher doubts that."

"You're allowed to have doubts. What you're not allowed," Harry said firmly, "is to harm them or be rude to them. The only person you're allowed to be rude to is the guy in the trunk upstairs. Do you understand?"

Kreacher grumbled a bit, but finally acknowledged the command. Once he had modified the ward, he asked to be excused.

Ron entered the kitchen as Kreacher popped away. "How was his night with the Dark Torso?" he asked.

"Quiet, thanks to a silencing charm," Harry said. He finished his juice, then pushed his glass away.

"Even though I know he can't hurt us, I found myself having trouble sleeping last night," Ron told him as he sat down. He leaned back when Dobby slid a plate in front of him. "I now understand what Hermione meant. Spending the rest of the summer in the same house as the Dark Lord is a little creepy."

Harry remained silent as Ron filled his plate. There wasn't much he could say, really.

"Did you send a note to the twins?" the red head asked.

"Yeah, and had Kreacher modify the wards. They should be here soon."

"Who should?" Hermione asked as she entered the kitchen.

"The twins," Ron told her, his mouth full of food.

She wrinkled her nose. "Chew first, please," she said as she filled her cup with tea. Dobby placed a plate of toast in front of her and she smiled her thanks. "You know, you might want to think about changing the wards again, Harry."

"Why?" he asked.

"Moody still has access. Don't get me wrong. I trust him. But he'd be able to see your guest."

Harry rubbed his ear. "True."

"What difference does it make? He'd be able to stand outside and see in," Ron told them.

"Crap. I hadn't thought of that," Harry said.

Hermione frowned. "Me, either."

"Kreacher!" Harry called.

The elf popped in a moment later, scowling. "The Master called?"

"Yes. We have a bit of a problem. I don't want Moody knowing about old Limbless upstairs. I know you can change the wards so he can't get in, and I want you to do that. But that won't keep him from seeing into the house if he's outside. I don't know enough about how his eye functions to fix that problem."

"Kreacher can ward the attic so Peg Leg can't see," the elf explained.

"Do so, please. I don't want him coming in or seeing anything."

Nodding, Kreacher modified the house wards once more, then popped back to the attic.

"Who knew he'd change so much," Ron commented after Kreacher left.

"We've all changed," Harry said quietly. When they looked at him questioningly, he shrugged and stood up. "Kreacher's not as twisted as he was, but we're not as straight laced, either. If we were, we wouldn't have our guest upstairs and the twins wouldn't be coming over."

"Speak for yourself," Hermione said with a huff. "I had nothing to do with the Torso upstairs."

Harry patted her on the head gently as he passed by on the way out of the kitchen. "You keep telling yourself that."

She growled as he left the kitchen.

"He's got a point," Ron said as he pushed his plate away and stood up. "There's nothing to stop you from leaving the house and telling the world about what's going on. Nothing but your friendship with us, anyway." He leaned over and grinned. "You're in this up to your bushy little head. The only thing you're having a problem with is the fact that you're enjoying it as much as we are."

She threw a piece of toast at him. "Shut up, you prat."

Laughing, he walked out of the kitchen. "See you in the library," he called.

Picking up the last piece of toast on her plate, she bit into it savagely. "I hate it when he's right," she muttered around her food. Blinking, she tossed the bread down and stood up. "God, even my manners are slipping!"

Refilling her cup with tea, she left the kitchen.

Dobby popped into the library half an hour later and announced that the twins had arrived, but seemed reluctant to enter.

Hermione looked up for her new Potions text and smiled. "They're probably afraid of getting the Dumbledore treatment if they try to open the door."

"I'll get them," Ron said as he stood up. "Have you figured out what you're going to tell them, Harry?"

"The truth, I suppose," he said. He marked his place in his Transfiguration text and closed it. "Not much point in lying, really."

Nodding, Ron left the library.

Harry turned to Dobby and spoke with him quietly. The elf nodded, then popped away.

Ron came back a few minutes later, a disgusted look on his face and the twins on his heels.

"They insisted on giving me their wands," he answered Harry's questioning look. Dumping said wands on the table, he sat down.

"We just wanted to make sure Harry felt safe," George explained.

"We saw part of what you did to Snape," Fred said. "Neither one of us is all that interested in a tattoo."

"Harry's methods of revenge have grown a bit more exotic since then," Hermione said, grinning.

"I appreciate the thought," Harry told them, "but it's really not necessary. Take your wands and sit down."

Shrugged, the twins did as they were told.

"So, does this have anything to do with Operation Overthrow?" Fred asked.

"Yes and no," Harry said.

"Well, so long as we're clear on that," George said with a laugh.

Harry grinned. "Oh, I don't know. Ambiguity has it's place."

"Yes, but this isn't it," Hermione grumbled. "Would you just tell them?"

"It's not exactly something you just blurt out," Ron said.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because they probably won't believe it!"

"So? It's not like we don't have proof!"

As they continued to argue, the twins watched avidly. It was obvious something big had happened.

Shaking his head, Harry turned to the twins, ignoring the arguing pair. "I'll give you the basics and fill in the details later."

Hermione and Ron stopped arguing and sat back to watch the twins.

"It seems I had a block on my magic. Never mind the hows or whys for the moment. The block was removed and I have a bit more power now."

When Ron snorted a laugh, he scowled at him, then continued. "Yesterday evening, Ron and I came up with an idea involving the summoning charm. To test it, I summoned my cousin's computer." He pointed to the wrecked machine near one bookcase, then shrugged. "It worked, so I tried to summon Pettigrew's heart."

The twins grew goggle eyed.

"Before you ask, no, we don't think it worked. At least, not like we'd hoped. Hermione explained that, even if the summoning did work, Pettigrew's heart is likely in several pieces, as it would have been forced through his ribs.

"Ron and I did a bit of brain storming after that and decided to leave off summoning internal organs. Instead, we thought about external body parts. To test it, I summoned Snape's Dark Mark."

"You did not!" George gasped.

"Dobby?" Harry called.

The elf popped in and handed him something wrapped in a towel. He nodded his thanks, then unwrapped the item. Grimacing slightly, he then handed it to George.

There, preserved in a picture frame like some deranged memento, was Severus Snape's Dark Mark.

The twins started at it, then looked at each other, blinking. George carefully placed the frame on the table, then both twins leaned back on their chairs and began to laugh.

Harry looked at his two best friends. Ron was grinning at his brothers, while Hermione was shaking her head and refusing to look at the thing on the table.

Wiping the tears of mirth from his eyes, Fred looked at Harry. "I don't suppose there was any way of getting pictures of the event?"

"That would be brilliant," George said.

"Sorry, guys. No pictures. But if you're really interested, I can show you the memory of the event," Harry offered.

"Just make sure you don't eat anything before you see it," Hermione grumbled.

"Just because you vomited doesn't mean they will," Ron told her.

"That was definitely worth closing the shop for," Fred said before Hermione could reply.

"Er, actually, I haven't gotten to the main reason for inviting you here," Harry said.

"There's more?" George asked.

"He's saving the best for last," Ron told his brothers. "If you liked that last bit, you'll love what's coming next."

"Ah, right," Harry said. "See, since the Mark could be summoned, we thought, why not go a bit further?"

"Further?" the twins asked, both leaning forward.

Harry shrugged. "I summoned Voldemort's wand."

The library fell silent as the twins stared at him in awe.

"You have his wand?" Fred finally asked.

Ron began to laugh. "Oh, you two are so going to love this," he chortled.

George shook his head. "Harry, that was really smart. I'm sure he'll be able to go get another one, but the fit won't be the same, will it?"

"No, I don't think he'll be able to get another. Harry's really disarmed him this time," Hermione said, then began to snicker.

Fred looked at her, though he spoke to Harry. "That will give you a real advantage when you face him," he said slowly.

Harry bit his lip and turned away.

"And you won't have to worry about the whole brother wands issue," George continued, though he looked puzzled.

"I hadn't thought of that," Fred said. He tilted his head slightly and looked at the trio oddly.

Hermione was biting her fist, trying to stifle her laughter. Ron was laughing outright and Harry had his head on the table, though his shoulders were shaking.

"All right, so what are we missing?" Fred asked.

"Something Harry hasn't gotten to yet, I'd guess," George said.

Harry raised a hand and pointed at George.

"Right. So, you want to let us in on the joke?" Fred asked.

Sitting up a few moments later, Harry bit back his laughter and smiled at the twins. "Sorry, that was rude of us."

"Not at all, dear fellow," George said magnanimously. "We know you'll get to it eventually."

Hermione wiped the tears from her eyes. "Generous of you."

"It was, rather," Fred agreed.

"So, you have Voldemort's wand," George said. "What else?"

The trio looked at each other for a moment, then turned back to the twins.

"We have his legs," Harry said.

"And his arms," Ron added.

"And the rest of him," Hermione concluded.

"Er..what?" George asked.

Fred shook his head. "I think they've gone crackers."

George's eyes narrowed. "Possibly, but let's hear them out."

Sighing, Harry sat back on his chair. "We're serious. After summoning his wand, I summoned his arms, then his legs, then him. He somehow managed to survive the trip, though it was close. I stunned him once he arrived and Kreacher stopped his bleeding. We poured several bottles of blood replenishing potion down his throat and he's now tucked away upstairs, furious, but helpless."

The twins stared at him for a few moments.

"I think Mum was right," George muttered. "Being alone in this house has driven them all nuts."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "It's not like we can't prove it to you."

They looked at her doubtfully.

Harry pushed away from the table and stood up. "Come on, then. He's in the attic."

As he walked out of the room, Ron followed him.

The twins frowned at each other, then stood up.

"You're not coming?" Fred asked Hermione.

"I've seen him," she said. Opening her Potions text, she shook her head. "Trust me, once was enough."

Shrugging, he trotted out to catch up with his brothers and Harry.

Some time later, a very embarrassed looking Harry entered the library with the Weasley brothers in tow.

Hermione lowered her book and raised an eyebrow when the entered. Ron was grinning unabashedly, while the twins looked at Harry with awe.

"You did it," Fred said quietly. "You actually did it. You captured the Dark Lord."

"The Dark Torso," Hermione corrected as Harry slid into the chair next to her. When the twins swung their gazes to her, she shrugged. "Harry thought the name change appropriate, considering the man no longer has his limbs."

"Brilliant," George breathed.

"Harry, do you realize what you've done?" Fred asked, his eyes wide. "You've single-handedly ended the war. You've captured the worst Dark Lord ever known, without bloodshed!"

"Not true," Ron said. "There was a lot of blood. It was all Voldemort's, and it's a miracle he survived, but there was bloodshed."

George waved that away. "That doesn't count. The asshole deserved to bleed, and so much more! Honestly, I don't think Harry understands the magnitude of what he's done." He turned to stare at Harry once more. "You showed us all in the DA that you were a great leader." His gaze turned a bit fatuous. "But this proves that you're a God!"

"They'll erect statues of him in Diagon Alley and at the Ministry," Fred said quietly, his eyes on Harry. "They'll hold parades and parties in his name. He'll be more famous than Merlin!"

The twins looked at each other for a moment, while Harry squirmed uncomfortably in his chair.

"And when the world finds out that he's been a silent partner in Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes since the beginning, business will boom!" George exclaimed.

"Including him as a partner was the smartest thing we ever did. The most famous wizard of all time endorsing our business? We're brilliant!" Fred added.

With a laugh, the twins began dancing a jig around the room.

Ron watched his brothers for a moment, then shook his head. "I think they've been testing too many of their own products."

"Mm," Hermione hummed, watching the brothers cavort around the library. "So, did you tell them the rest of the plan?"

"Not yet," Harry said, scowling. "They kept going on about how great I am. It made me so uncomfortable that I didn't get around to it. They wouldn't even listen when I told them that Ron helped me come up with the idea, or that you taught me the spell that made it possible."

Hermione blinked. "Don't pull me into this. I had nothing to do with it."

Harry snorted. "You keep telling yourself that."

She looked between her two best friends, then shook her head. "There are days that I truly wish the troll had won."

The boys simply grinned at her. She was lying, and they knew it.

"So," Ron said loudly, "do you think the twins want to hear about our plans? Or should we leave them to their dancing?"

The twins came to a halt, mid-jig and looked at him. "Plan?" they asked.

"It's simple, really." Harry told them. "You're always looking for test subjects for your products, and I happen to have a house guest who needs to earn his keep."

When the twins eyes went wide and glassy, Hermione began to snicker. "Hold on to something, Harry. They're about to start again."

"He is a God," George breathed.

"Generous, thoughtful, always looking out for others. He is the perfect man," Fred added.

"Er, well, actually, it was Ron's idea," Harry muttered.

The twins turned to Ron and gazed at him with enough loving affection that he flinched away. "Stop that!"

"And don't forget Hermione," Harry added. "If she hadn't taught me the spell, you wouldn't have a captive test subject."

Hermione quirked an eyebrow when the twins looked at her.

"Generous," Fred said.

"Caring," George added.

"A loving and faithful friend."

"Graceful and intelligent, not to mention, beautiful."

Hermione smiled. "Why, yes. Yes, I am. It's so nice of the little people to notice."

When the twins fell to their knees and gazed up at her in adoration, she waved her hand airily and told them to rise.

"Is it my imagination," Ron asked, frowning slightly, "or did she look as though she'd practiced that?"

When Hermione sniffed and looked away, Harry shook his head. "All right, enough fooling around. Let's get down to business."

Later that night, Harry pulled the elves aside, separately, and gave them their final instructions. They were not to fight, Dobby was to take care of the kitchens, Kreacher was to take care of their house guest, and both were to take care of the house. The Weasley twins were to be treated as honored guests, but no one else was allowed into the house without Harry's permission. If something came up that was not covered in his previous instructions, they were to contact him.

September 1st, Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$

Remus watched the Express pull out and sighed. Harry and his friends were off safely, though he would have felt better if he'd been on the train with them. They'd been well trained over the summer, but they were still kids. He didn't doubt that they would do what they had to do in order to protect themselves. It was what came after that worried him. No child should have to kill to live.

"Remus?" a voice called softly.

Turning, he nearly scowled when he saw Tonks standing behind him.

"Yes?" he asked coldly.

Tonks shifted nervously. "I was wondering if we could talk?"

He shrugged. "As long as it doesn't take too long. What do you want?"

She looked around at the people still milling about platform, then at him. "Perhaps someplace more private?"

"I don't have time. Say what you need to say."

She scowled and moved closer. "Look, Remus, I know you're angry at Dumbledore for some reason, but why are you being so cold to me?"

"Are you still a member of the Order?" he asked.

"Yes, of course."

"There's your answer."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked, confused.

"It means that, because I followed Dumbledore, never questioning his actions or orders, I nearly helped him kill the person most important to me."

"What are you talking about?"

"Harry has been abused by his relatives since Dumbledore dumped him on their doorstep, Tonks. He has suffered at their hands, with Dumbledore's full knowledge. He needed Harry to be timid and easily influenced. He needed someone gullible enough to walk willingly to his own slaughter!"

Realizing his was raising his voice, he growled and raked a hand through his hair. "Look, there's no point in this. You're so enthralled by Dumbledore that you're unable to see past the image the public has built around him. All you need to understand is that Harry comes before anything else in my life. And anyone who follows Dumbledore is a threat to Harry. Consider this your only warning, Tonks. Whatever orders Dumbledore gives you, if they concern Harry in any way, you'll face me."

He turned away from her and took a few steps, then paused. Looking over his shoulder, he met her eyes. "And if that happens, you won't like the results."

As he walked away, Tonks hugged herself tightly and shivered.

Hogwarts Express...

"She's afraid," Ron said quietly once Hermione had left to use the bathroom. "She's trying to hide it, but it's plain to see."

"I can't say I blame her," Harry replied as he warded the door for privacy. "As bad as the Ministry is, even I didn't think they'd release all the Death Eaters they captured in the DOM. And while I don't think Dolohov would actually come after her, the possibility is there."

Ron looked out the window, the disgust he felt plain on his face. "I tried to ask Dad about it at the station, but all he wanted to do was lecture me about how much I'd worried Mum over the summer."

"She looked torn between wanting to squeeze the stuffing out of you or locking you up someplace safe." Harry said.

"She still hasn't made up her mind. The twins were able to pull her off of me just in time, or I would have missed the train." Turning to face his best friend, he scowled. "And don't think I didn't notice you bolting for the train the moment you saw her, either. You could have stayed around to help."

"Now what kind of student would I be if I'd done that?" Harry asked, his eyes dancing. "Moody taught us that it's better to retreat from a losing battle than to stick it out and die."

"Asshole," Ron muttered.

"Isn't there a Prefect meeting?" Harry asked, changing the subject.

"Yeah, later. Not that it matters."

"What do you mean?"

Ron shook his head. "Come on, Harry. Once Operation Overthrow goes into full swing, do you honestly think Hermione and I will get to keep our badges?"

Harry's expression become unreadable. "I hadn't thought of that. I'm sorry."

Ron shrugged. "Don't be. Hermione and I talked about it over the summer. You're more important than any badge. You should know that by now."

He looked away, his face tight. "Maybe, but you've both given up a lot for me."

"Not just for you, and you would have done the same," Ron said impatiently. "Let's not start with the brooding, please. Now, back to Dolohov. Is there anything we can do to help Hermione?"

"I don't know, but it does prove Moody was right. Capturing Death Eaters only means you have to face them again."

"Well, we took care of the biggest problem. Isn't there something we could do about his toadies? Something just as vicious, only without the long term care involved?"

Harry shrugged. "Like what?"

"I don't know. Summon Dolohov to us and we'll use him as a target dummy for the DA."

"Tempting," Harry said. "But keeping that a secret might be a little difficult. Besides, I think we want a more permanent solution. And not just for Dolohov, either. Tom isn't a problem any longer, but his minions might still be."

"Moody must have rubbed off on me more than I realized," Ron muttered. "Interestingly enough, I find that I no longer have a problem with the idea of killing Death Eaters."

"I can't argue with you there. I'm not sure I like the idea, but I figure introspection and soul searching can come later. Right now, I think we need to come up with a few ideas to fix the Ministry's mistake."

"Right. So, what are we going to do?"

Harry remained silent for a few moments, letting the rocking of the train sooth him a bit. "Ron?" he finally asked quietly. "How do you feel about being a bit late to school this year?"

Ron's eyes narrowed. "What do you have in mind?"

"An accident." Harry said. "A tragic, unexplained accident."

Standing, Harry opened the compartment door and stepped out, Ron following behind him.

Hermione entered the compartment a few minutes later and frowned at finding the boys gone. Shrugging, she pulled out a book, figuring they'd went to hunt down the food cart.

When the door slid open, she looked up and smiled at Ginny, Neville and Luna. "I'm surprised. I thought the three of you would join us as soon as you got on board."

"We thought we'd give you some privacy," Ginny told her as she flopped down next to her, then put a privacy charm on the door.

"And we wanted to speak to some of the others," Neville added. "A few wanted to rush in here and talk to Harry about Operation Overthrow."

"How was your summer, Hermione?" Luna asked, sitting down across from her.

"Er...productive," Hermione answered honestly. "And yours?"

"Very interesting," Luna said as she gazed calmly out the window. "I've never overthrown a school before and I find myself rather excited by the whole idea."

Ginny grinned. "Yeah, me too. And the fact that we have an honest reason for wanting to do so just makes it that much better."

Neville snickered and sat down next to Luna.

"Ginny," Hermione said, reprovingly.

"Don't start, Hermione," Ginny interrupted. "Don't think for one moment that I don't know that this was your idea."

"My idea?" Hermione squawked.

"Oh, I'm sure Harry had no plans on cooperation with Dumbledore. But to get the DA involved? No, that had to be your idea," the red head told her.

"Harry's too private. He wouldn't have even thought of it," Luna added.

"And it was a good idea," Neville chimed in. "When the Golden Trio has a good idea, that generally means you came up with it and brow beat the other two into following through with it."

Hermione opened her mouth to protest when the train suddenly braked hard, sending her and Ginny flying at Neville and Luna. Neville managed to catch Ginny and hold on to her, but Hermione

slammed into Luna with some force and both girls grunted at the impact.

"What on Earth?" Hermione muttered as the train slid to a stop.

"I've no idea," Ginny said, climbing out of Neville's arms. "Nice catch though, Nev. Thanks."

"No problem," he told her. "Is everyone all right?"

"Bruised, I think," Luna mumbled a bit groggily. Hermione's elbow had struck her temple and she felt a bit woozy.

Hermione looked at her worriedly. "Did I hurt you?"

"Not purposely, no," the blond said as she held her head.

"Nev," Hermione said as she climbed to her feet. "Keep an eye on her, would you? I want to find out what's going on."

As Neville moved to examine Luna, Hermione slid the compartment door open and looked around at the sea of faces doing the same thing she was. The babble of excited voices and a few cries of pain were heard up and down the train car.

Adjusting her Prefect badge, she stepped out of the compartment. "Everyone get back into your compartments. If someone is hurt, find a Prefect or send someone to the front of the train to report it."

Glaring around, she then nodded as the other students began to comply.

Making her way to the front of the train, she ran into Harry. "Where have you been? Are you all right? What's going on?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yes, I'm fine. There's been an accident. All Prefects are to report to the front of the train. Ron's already there. I guess they've called in aurors. I'm sure you'll know more than most students in a few minutes. I've been ordered back to the compartment."

"Ordered?" she asked. "By whom?"

"Malfoy!" Harry spat. "Why they made him a Prefect, I'll never know, but it gave the little Ferret great pleasure to order me about. Asshole!"

"Neville, Ginny and Luna are in the compartment. I think Luna might be hurt. If she is, make sure to send someone to the front of the train when the aurors get here," she told him. "I'll see you when I can."

Nodding, Harry moved past her.

When she entered the Prefect compartment, she glanced around at the babbling group and spotted Ron. Moving toward him, she paused long enough to report Luna's possible injury to Cho Chang, who'd been named Head Girl.

"What happened," she asked Ron when she reached him.

"The train hit something," he said, shrugging. "Did you see Harry?"

"Yes. He said Malfoy had ordered him to go back to the compartment."

Ron scowled. "I'm sure he loved being able to do that."

"Probably." Looking around, she frowned slightly. "Any idea how long we have to wait?"

"It should be..." The sound of many people apparating cut him off.

"Maybe now we'll find out what's going on," Hermione said impatiently. "We're going to be late as it is."

"I doubt they'll hold us here long," Ron said placidly. "They'll want to get us all to the school as quickly as possible."

Hermione looked at him closely for a few moments. "All right, Ronald. What's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you're acting suspiciously uninterested in what's happening. Normally, you'd be demanding answers. To anyone who doesn't know you better, you look as though you couldn't care less."

"Oh, I care. This accident is going to delay our arrival, which means dinner's going to be late." He frowned. "I hate that."

"Ron," she growled warningly.

He looked at her for a moment, then gazed around the room full of Prefects meaningfully. "We'll discuss it later, Hermione."

Sighing, she sunk down on the chair next to his. "You bet your ass we will. I hate it when you two do things like this without telling me," she muttered.

"Think of it this way. It saved a lot of arguing," he told her cheerfully. "I heard once that it's easier to ask for forgiveness than it is to ask for permission. Turns out, it's true."

Almost two hours later, the Hogwarts Express was rocketing through the evening gloom. Being behind schedule, the engineer had poured the proverbial magical coals to the engine, trying to make up time.

The aurors had tried to keep the students ignorant of what had actually happened, but that was impossible. Every compartment in each car was full of students, all trying to puzzle out why a known, but exonerated Death Eater would throw himself in front of a moving train. As suicides went, it was spectacular, and many Muggle born and half bloods speculated that he wished to go out with a real splash.

The pure bloods were not amused.

When Hermione and Ron had finally returned to their compartment, Harry had glanced at Ron for a moment and they'd shared a rather wicked, if grim, smile.

That was all the confirmation Hermione needed. She had, after all, already witnessed their rather unique, if disgusting, use of the summoning charm. Putting it together wasn't that difficult, and she found herself unwilling to berate them for summoning Dolohov to the Express. If they miscalculated and actually summoned him to the tracks in front of the moving train, who was she to complain? The man had tried to kill her, after all.

She blinked at the directions her thoughts were taking and seriously began to wonder where the law abiding girl she'd once been had disappeared to.

She, like the others in the compartment, looked up when the door slid open.

"No trip on the train is complete without a visit from the Ferret," Ron quipped as he looked at Draco Malfoy and his two goons.

"I didn't think they allowed ferrets," Ginny said. "Toads, owls or cats, I believe, but not ferrets."

"Shut it, Weasel," Draco snarled.

"A ferret is a member of the weasel family," Luna told him seriously. "You should be nicer to your relatives."

When everyone stared at her, she blinked owlily. "What?" she asked. "Weasels are quick, cunning and can be vicious when the situation calls for it. All things so admired by Slytherin House, but seem to be missing in recent years. I always assumed the Ferret was jealous of Ron and Ginny for having the qualities he, and his whole House, so obviously lack."

"What are you talking about?" Draco sputtered furiously.

"She means you've become predictable," Neville said. "Every year, you come in, make some snide comments, a couple of threats, then leave. Which one is it this year, Malfoy? 'Well, if it isn't Scar-head, the Mud blood and the Weasel', 'You'll get yours, Potter!', or 'Wait until my father hears about this, Potter!'?"

"You're forgetting the ever popular 'The Dark Lord will kill you, Potter!'," Harry added.

"Right, can't forget that one," Neville said, nodding.

"I think that about covers it," Hermione said. "And since we've done your job for you, Draco -" With a flick of her wand, she closed the compartment door in Draco's face and locked it.

The six people in the compartment looked at each other, then began to laugh.

Authors Notes:

~Alyx stares at the readers blankly for a moment~

Nope, I got nothing.

~ Bob's note

I had something, but after giving it to DaZZa, 20cc's of penicillin took care of it for me.

Disclaimer:

Bob and Alyx sat in an announcer's booth and smiled brightly for the camera.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the first, and most likely last, Hogwarts Day parade," Alyx told the viewing audience.

"The organizers have a real treat for us today," Bob said, looking down the parade route. "And it looks like they're starting things off with a real eye catcher! Here comes the first float."

"Ah, wonderful," Alyx said as she spotted it. "A nice tribute to the Leader of the Light, Albus Dumbledore!"

The camera swung around and zoomed in. Upon the float were capering Death Eaters chasing young, attractive girls (and a few boys) who were in various states of undress. Behind them were the smoldering ruins of what looked like the float builder's interpretation of the Ministry of Magic. Over the float was a banner that read, "And it was all thanks to Albie!"

"That must have taken some work," Bob commented.

"True, and I think we blew our disclaimer budget on this little party," Alyx muttered.

"That, or your chocolate bars," Bob said, scowling. He couldn't believe he'd fallen for the old PMS gag again.

"Don't start," she snapped. "Besides, here comes the next float!"

"Oh, and this one's a doozy, folks! The organizers have allowed the House Elves to create their own float. How's that for equal rights?" Bob asked.

"Not bad, though I'm not sure letting Dobby and Kreacher build it was such a great idea," Alyx said as she squinted at the float. "A bit...perverse, isn't it?"

At the front of the float was Lucius Malfoy. He was naked, on his hands and knees with a gag in his mouth. Behind him was a giant

dildo, doing what dildos do, while Dobby stood back, wielding a whip on the man.

Behind him stood Kreacher, heating a branding iron and cackling madly.

"Perverse? Maybe. But then this is a disclaimer," Bob reminded her.

"Hm," Alyx hummed in agreement. "Oh, look! The parade Queen's float is next. Isn't that lovely?"

"As the Queen is Millicent Bulstrode, 'lovely' isn't a word I'd use," Bob quipped. "But at least in this chapter she does put one nagging question to rest."

"What nagging question is that?" Alyx asked as she watched the Queen's float go by, and shook her head as the Queen flipped the audience the bird.

"That she really doesn't have balls, as many suspected," he told her, and casually send an obscene gesture back at the girl.

"She could have tucked them back, you know."

"I hadn't thought of that," Bob said, shaking his head. "No matter, it's time to wrap this up. The final float is rolling up now! Ladies and gentlemen, give a warm welcome the students of Gryffindor, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw!"

The float rolled passed the booth, loaded down with students, who danced and waved to the crowd.

"Oh, now that's a fantastic way to end a parade," Alyx said, wiping away a tear as she pointed.

Attached to the rear of the float was a hugely inflated Voldemort singing, "I'm Henry the Eighth, I Am" in a rich baritone. Attached to his head and streaming out behind him was a banner that read "They don't own Harry Potter, ya nitwits!"

#12 Grimmauld Place...

"Harry Potter said we need to stay in the house unless we are on House business," Dobby said.

Kreacher looked up from the cauldron he was stirring. It contained a house elf potion that he had been hoping to try for years. "Yes, and we're doing House of Black business. Besides, Master didn't name you head elf."

"Kreacher wasn't named head elf either," Dobby shot back.

Kreacher glared at Dobby. "You know what this means. We need to please Master until he makes his choice!"

Dobby blinked and stared at Kreacher in surprise. He had forgotten about that. He and Kreacher were now in competition for the position of head elf.

"Dobby will prove he is a better elf than nasty Kreacher!"

The little elf gestured and a small axe appeared in his hand, then he vanished from sight.

"Crazy elf," muttered Kreacher. "My potion will prove that Kreacher is the best." The elf crooned to the cauldron and stirred it harder, then cocked his head slightly. "Needs a few more spleens from dead fishies..."

Hogwarts, half an hour later, the sorting...

"Seems to be taking longer than usual, doesn't it?" Ron asked.

"That's your stomach talking," Hermione quipped. "I'm sure the first years will be along shortly."

The Great Hall was filled with chattering students, though they seemed a bit louder than usual this year. Many were still retelling the incident with the Express, going over the gory details, bit by bit, doing their best to gross each other out.

Hagrid and Minerva...

Minerva stepped out into the grotto and looked down on the new first year students as she did every year. This time, however, something was amiss.

Shaking her head at the sight before her, she turned to Hagrid. "What happened?" she sputtered.

"The boats sank! It was the strangest thin'. One minute we was floatin' along as usual, the next, we started sinkin'. I had a heck o' a time convincin' the squid to stop playin' with the children long enough to get 'em all ashore," the giant man told her as he tried to wring out the sleeves of his coat. "The little tykes are scared to death o' the squid now, an' I don' imagine they'll be wantin' to go swimmin' any time soon, either."

"Between the accident with the Express and now this, let's hope we've had our bumps for the year," she muttered as she turned to the frightened, soaked students to begin her speech.

Hogwarts, the lake...

Dobby stood on the shore, staring toward the grotto the students had disappeared into. He looked down at the axe in his hand and smiled.

So, Kreacher thought Harry Potter liked him more because he got to pluck the Headmaster? Dobby snorted. He'd show that twisted little elf and help Harry Potter create a little mischief while he was at it!

He looked up at the school and sighed. He couldn't wait to tell Kreacher what he'd done. But first, there was one more task he needed to do.

Dobby grinned maniacally and vanished with a small pop.

Hogwarts, breakfast...

Ron nudged Harry to get his attention. "Hermione and I have heard from the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff Prefects. Everyone knows the plan and is on board. Well, everyone but the first years."

Harry nodded, then looked at Hermione, who sat across from them.

She shrugged. "It's up to you, now. Let's get this revolt started."

Harry shook his head. "You're all nuts. Have I told you that?"

"A few times, yes. Now get going," Ron said, nudging him again.

Grabbing a last slice of toast, Harry stood up and noticed that conversations at the Gryffindor, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables stopped and all eyes turned toward him. Smiling slightly, he waved and left the Great Hall, toast in hand, whistling a jaunty tune.

Once he'd gone, Hermione looked at Ron, then pushed her teacup away. "We'd better get to class." Grabbing her book bag, she stood up.

"Transfiguration. This should be fun," Ron said as he put his fork down and stood. He looked around as they walked toward the exit and noticed other students getting up and heading to class. "She's going to have kittens, you know."

"Probably. Too bad Colin's not in our class. He could snap a few pictures," Hermione said, grinning.

"You know, you sure have changed," he told her. "There was a time not too long ago you'd have been having a litter right beside McGonagall."

She shrugged. "We all have to grow up sometime, Ron. So, how long until they send for the cavalry?"

As they walked down the hall, they took bets on how long it would take them to find Harry.

Harry, meanwhile, was enjoying a beautiful morning. The lake was afire with reflected sunlight, puffy clouds scurried across the sky and his Firebolt was performing beautifully.

After last year, he never thought he'd see his broom again. Late last night, when he'd entered his dorm room, he'd found it on his bed, with a note from Dobby. The elf had found the broom for him, though he wasn't sure when. He'd have to talk to him about that.

Or maybe not. He'd noticed at the Feast that Umbridge was back this year to teach Defense. He was sure the old toad hadn't voluntarily give the elf the broom. Maybe he'd give Dobby a gift, rather than a firm talking to.

Shrugging the thought away, he put his Firebolt through its paces. He might not be playing Quidditch anymore, thanks to his ban, but nothing was said about flying for pleasure!

Sometime later, he noticed several people on the pitch below him, waving and shouting. Squinting slightly, he noticed one bald head that stood out and couldn't help but grin. Ignoring those below, he did a lazy spiral turn and shot off in the opposite direction, wondering if he could buy a snitch, just to keep in practice.

Circling the pitch, he flew slowly over the group below him.

"Harry Potter, you come down here this instant!" Dumbledore bellowed, obviously using a Sonorus charm.

Harry tapped his ear and shook his head. Then, shrugging, he flew off.

A few minutes later, he noticed an old school broom laboring to catch up with him. He slowed up slightly, then nearly fell off his broom at what he saw. Dumbledore! On a broom!

The Headmaster caught up with him and they flew, side by side for a few moments.

"Lovely morning for a flight," Dumbledore said conversationally.

"It is, yes. I've missed it," Harry replied.

"I'm sure. However, can you explain how you got your Firebolt back?"

He shrugged. "I went up to the dorm late last night and it was on my bed."

"Really? So you have no idea how Professor Umbridge ended up chained in her closet, where she'd been keeping your Firebolt?"

Harry's eyes widened. "What? Chained?"

"Yes. We looked for her this morning when she didn't show up for the staff meeting. She couldn't explain how she ended up there."

"Wait, back up! She chained up my Firebolt?" He glared at the Headmaster. "Do you have any idea what this broom means to me? Or how much it cost? If there's even a scratch on it, she's going to pay for it."

When he began talking about hiring a solicitor to sue the school and Umbridge for property damage, the Headmaster cleared his throat.

"Harry, why did you not come down when I asked?" he asked, talking loudly to be heard over the boy's muttering.

Harry stopped, mid-rant, and looked at Dumbledore. "To be honest, Headmaster, I didn't recognize you. If you don't mind my asking, what happened to your hair...and your beard? Bald just doesn't suit you." He squinted at him and tilted his head to the side. "Red eyes, no nose, and you could be Voldemort."

Dumbledore scowled. "You're missing class, Mister Potter."

Harry pushed his lower lip out in a pout. "Will you expel me for it?"

"Of course not!"

"In that case..." Harry leaned forward on his broom and took off like a shot.

His carefree laughter drifted back to Dumbledore and the man frowned. The old school broom couldn't keep up. Neither could the old school Headmaster, he admitted to himself. He could feel muscles cramping in his legs and back...muscles he'd almost forgotten he had.

Sighing heavily, he headed for the pitch and landed a little more roughly than he'd hoped. Grunting at the impact, he climbed off the broom and passed it to Hooch, who smiled knowingly.

"I told you that you should have let me go after him," she remarked.

He waved that away and watched as Harry dove toward the ground, only to swoop back up again, graceful as a bird in flight. Sighing, he turned to Minerva. "We'll leave him for now."

"Albus, he can't be allowed to disrupt class like this," the Professor groused.

"I agree. As it was your class he missed, I expect that you'll assign him detention for his misbehavior." Turning away from the pitch, he walked toward the school, Minerva on his heels.

Hooch watched them leave, then turned back to the flying teenager. "I'm not sure what's going on with you, Potter, but you sure can fly, boy!"

That evening, after two headache potions and more lemon drops than were really good for him, the Headmaster was seriously considering gouging out his own ears to shut out the shouting match his Professors were currently engaged in. Oh, he could have used a silencing charm or other magical means to silence the din, but for some odd reason, the violence appealed to him, even if it was self-directed.

When he noticed mild-mannered Professor Spout suddenly draw her wand and point it at Professor Vector, he figured it was time to interfere.

Lifting his own wand, he fired off a concussive blast that had everyone in the room clapping their hands to their ears and turning to glare at him.

"That's better. Now, perhaps we could all return to our seats and discuss this like rational adults?" he asked, more calmly than he thought possible.

With much muttering, the Professors did as he asked.

Nodding in approval, he turned to Minerva. "Now what, exactly, is the problem?"

"Potter," she snapped. "He didn't show up to any of his classes today."

Dumbledore sighed. "Have you assigned detentions?"

"Aye, we have. But Albus, there's something not right with the boy," she protested. "Potter's never been like this!"

"While true, I think he will settle down," he said calmly and wondered if they'd notice if he crossed his fingers. "Please remember, he lost his Godfather not that long ago. I'm sure he'll come around with time."

When the muttering started, he sighed. "Please, Professors, if there's nothing else, we've all had a long day. Minerva, do let me know how Mister Potter's detention goes."

Nodding stiffly, she stood up. "You can be sure of that, Albus." Turning, she left the office, followed by the others.

Albus winced when the door slammed closed. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he leaned back on his chair. Tomorrow would be better, he was sure.

The next morning, he was revising his opinion.

He'd been awakened at the crack of dawn by Minerva, who seemed to take perverse delight in dragging him out of bed, all the while haranguing him in such a shrill voice, he was sure his ears were bleeding.

He stood in his bedchamber, dressed in his nightgown and cap, staring at her dumbly while she informed him that Potter had gone beyond the pale. He hadn't shown up for his detention so she'd gone to the Common Room to find him. A third year student informed her that he was in the library, so she'd gone to get him. Only, when she got there, Ron Weasley informed her that she'd just missed him and that he was heading for the kitchen.

From the kitchen she was sent to Hagrid's, then the Great Hall, then the third floor broom closet ("You wouldn't believe who I found, nearly naked among the cleaning supplies!"). In the end, enraged, she'd went back to the Common Room, only to be informed that he was in his dorm room. Marching up the steps, she found him calmly reading a book and munching on a pastry!

Pacing furiously, nearly tearing out her hair, McGonagall suddenly whirled to face the Headmaster, one eye twitching. "And do you know what that boy had the gall to say to me? Do you?" she all but bellowed at him.

"I'm not sure I want to know," Albus muttered.

"He said, 'I'm sorry, Professor. I don't feel like serving detention tonight. Or any other night, come to that.'" Taking a deep breath, she then glared at Dumbledore. When he didn't say anything, she threw up her hands. "Well? What do you intend to do about this?"

Raising a hand to stroke his beard, he scowled. Damn, he missed his beard. "I'll talk to him, Minerva."

"I should think so! This cannot be allowed to continue!" With one final glare, she marched out of his bedchamber. A few seconds later, he heard his office door slam.

And the day had only gotten worse. Potter hadn't shown up to class, yet again. He'd been found by the lake, playing with the squid. Dumbledore hadn't been able to convince him to go to class and, in the end, had floated him there himself. The students had laughed, Professor Flitwick had glared and muttered about the nerve of some students, and Albus had developed another headache.

By lunch, it had become apparent that, while Albus could drag Harry to each of his classes, he couldn't make the boy perform. He sat in each class, staring straight ahead and humming to himself.

Retiring to his office to think, he was interrupted by an enraged Professor Snape, who had developed a rather suspicious, and very unfortunate stutter, but only with words that began with the letter p.

"I cannot fix this!" Snape snarled. "I've tried every spell I can think of and nothing works. Do you have any idea how hard it is to talk about p-p-p-potions when you can't even say the word? And forget about taking p-p-p-points! The damn hourglasses can't understand what I'm trying to say, so they ignore me!"

Two hours, many books, and one visit to St. Mungo's later, Snape was left to fume and sputter. The stutter remained and he was told he'd have to do his best. Snape tried to blame it on Potter, but as

the boy wasn't in his class, Albus assured him, or tried to, that it wasn't possible.

At dinner, Dumbledore stopped by the Gryffindor table and smiled at Harry and his friends.

"Good evening, Mister Potter, Miss Granger, Mister Weasley."

"Hello, Headmaster," Hermione said, smiling politely.

"Io, Professor," Ron muttered, his mouth full of food.

"Hi," Harry said cheerfully.

"Mister Potter, would you please join me in my office after dinner?"

"No, thank you, Headmaster."

Ron began to cough, and Harry slapped him on the back a few times, all the while smiling at Dumbledore.

"Sorry," Ron wheezed. "Food went down the wrong pipe."

"Try not shoveling it in so fast," Hermione suggested sweetly.

"I'm hungry!" he complained.

"It's not going to run away, Ron. Slow down and chew."

As his friends continued their good-natured argument, Dumbledore leaned down to Harry. "I really must insist you join me in my office."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I have other plans and I really can't break them," Harry told him, his eyes shining with sincerity.

"What is so important that you cannot spare an hour, Mister Potter?"

"Origami," he replied. "You'd be surprised how difficult it is."

Dumbledore blinked.

"It's very relaxing," Harry went on enthusiastically. "Earlier today in Herbology, I nearly made a horse before it was shredded by a plant. Who knew some plants were attracted to paper?"

"You would, if you'd go to, and pay attention in your classes," the Headmaster snapped.

Harry's eyes widened in mock disappointment. "Oh, and here we were having an enjoyable discussion, and you had to go and ruin it!" His low lip quivered and he looked at Dumbledore pleadingly. "Don't you love me anymore?"

"Mister Potter, I've had enough of this foolishness!" Drawing his wand, Albus levitated Harry from his seat and walked out of the Great Hall, the bobbing boy following behind him obediently, for once.

Harry, seated in the air behind Dumbledore, smiled and waved at the students in the hall as they all laughed and pointed. When some of the Slytherin students jeered, he stuck his tongue out at them.

Ron and Hermione watched Harry's unique exit from the Great Hall with interest. It was clear that their friend's actions had finally gotten the better of Dumbledore. If only the Headmaster understood that the real war hadn't started yet.

"I'm a little disappointed," Hermione said quietly. "To be honest, I thought the old man would last longer than this."

Ron shrugged. "I'm not sure he's ever had a student openly defy him in front of the whole school before. In any case, Harry's enjoying himself."

"Something that hasn't happened nearly often enough."

"It's interesting, really. Dumbledore denied Harry any type of real childhood, and now Harry's enjoying rubbing that in. Honestly, he's acting like a little kid. And it looks like loads of fun."

Hermione laughed. "Don't worry, Ron. Our time is coming."

Meanwhile, after a rather interesting trip to Dumbledore's office, Harry found himself seated in front of the Headmaster's desk,

staring into the disappointed eyes of a man he'd once respected, though he couldn't remember why.

"So, are we going to stare at each other all night, or was there something you wanted?" Harry asked. "Honestly, I could be crafting paper animals right now."

"Mister Potter, Harry, we really must discuss this unfortunate anger problem you seem to have developed. Perhaps if we discovered the reasons behind your feelings, we could put an end to this nonsense."

Harry shrugged. "It's simple, really. You are the problem. Short of you marching down to the Great Hall and announcing your retirement as Headmaster of the school, I don't really see any way of resolving anything. Besides, I'm having way too much fun!"

Dumbledore sighed. "I know I didn't handle things as well as I should have after the incident at the Department of Mysteries," he began, then frowned when the boy's eyes turned cold.

"Don't," Harry hissed. "I don't care about your regrets, you bastard. I have enough of my own without having to listen to yours."

"What do you want me to say?" the Headmaster asked.

"Nothing. Nor do I want you to do anything," he replied coldly. "Let me explain what's going to happen this year, and every year that follows until you get the hell out of my life. I will do nothing you suggest, demand or order. I will not willingly go to class. I will do no homework, nor will I serve detention. I will not walk out and face Voldemort. I simply see no need to do so. You want him dead? Great! Kill him yourself."

"But the prophecy," Dumbledore said, alarmed.

"It's a load of crap, spewed out by a drunken old woman who should have been retired a long time ago." Harry shook his head. "Tell me something. Have you tried to kill Voldemort yourself?"

Dumbledore blinked. "The prophecy said..."

"Oh, for God's sake!" Harry interrupted. "Because of the prophecy, you've allowed that murdering bastard to kill countless people, while you sit, wringing your hands, waiting for me to grow up and kill him for you. You're as bad as he is! You sit back and watch the world burn, hoping some part of it remains when I'm strong enough to do something you should have done a long time ago. Hell, you might as well take the Mark and join him officially. You've done nothing but help him on his rise to power.

"And you wonder why I'm mad? Fucking unbelievable!"

"Language, Mister Potter!" Dumbledore snapped.

Harry smiled. "Stuff it up your ass. Let me give you a little advice. Expel me from this school. You'll regret every second I remain here."

"I have many regrets," Dumbledore said quietly. "You being here will not be one of them. I've dealt with rebellious students before and all came to heel soon enough."

"'Came to heel'? Am I a dog now? Shall I sit up and beg for treats?" Harry scoffed. "You've no idea what you're getting into. When I'm done with you, you'll be a broken, shell of a man. You'll flinch and whimper any time someone mentions my name. Don't believe me? Ask yourself this, genius. According to the prophecy you believe so wholeheartedly in, I'm supposed to kill or be killed by Voldemort. You seem to think I can kill him. If that's true, how much trouble could it possibly be to break you?"

Harry stood up and read the doubt on the Headmaster's face. "Believe it," he said simply, then turned and walked from the office.

When the door closed, Dumbledore leaned back on his chair. "That could have gone better," he mumbled.

September 3rd, Afternoon...

Ron and Hermione stood outside of the Potions classroom, waiting for Professor Snape and the other students to arrive.

Hermione leaned against the wall, glaring at Ron and tapping her foot. "You know, I'm all for punctuality, but this is a little ridiculous.

Class isn't due to start for another fifteen minutes. Why did we have to come so early?"

"Two reasons," Ron said as he dug through his book bag. "Ah ha! I knew I put it in here." Standing, he held out his hand. "This is the first reason."

Leaning forward, Hermione examined the object in the palm of his hand. It looked like a small, rubber ball, yellow in color. "Do I want to know what that is?"

"Two words: the twins," he told her, grinning.

"Right. Don't want to know."

"They'll be heartbroken if they hear you say that." Looking down at the ball, he drew his wand and tapped it once. "Slytherins are such interesting people," he murmured.

The ball began to glow, then shot off further into the dungeons.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "What did you just do?"

"Umm...Volunteered Slytherin to test one of Fred and George's products?"

"Ronald!"

"It's not as bad as it sounds, Hermione. The twins have already tested it. This is actually more of a practice run to see if it's practical. They also said something about it helping to take care of our Slytherin problem during our operation at Hogwarts." He shook his head. "Operation? They've been watching too many muggle war movies."

"Muggle war movies?"

"Alicia's fault. She has some sort of contraption that plays movies. Over the summer, she and Angelina had the twins over a lot and played movies for them. The girls paid for it, though. Fred and George wouldn't stop quoting things they heard in the movies they'd watched. The girls finally banned them from the house until they promised to never do it again."

Hermione grinned. "Sometimes your brothers don't know when to stop."

"Oh, they learned. Two weeks with no nookie settled them down." Seeing Hermione's expression, he held up both hands. "Hey, don't get on me for it. That's almost a direct quote from Fred. If you don't like it, talk to him about it."

"I'll pass, thanks."

"Thought you might." He smiled, then looked down the hall.

She looked around. "All right, so what's the second reason we came down early?"

Ron's eyes narrowed. "Them."

Following his gaze, she frowned. "Davis and Zabini?"

"Yes. I want to talk to them for a moment, and this seemed like the best time. They're almost always the first ones here before class."

"Why them?"

"Out of all the snakes in Slytherin, they're the smartest of the lot, though that isn't saying much. I thought I might be able to save us a bit of trouble later on."

Hermione laughed. "They're Slytherins. They live for trouble!"

Ron grinned. "That's what I'm hoping for."

"I wouldn't believe it if I didn't see it. Two Gryffindors, early for class? What is the world coming too?" Tracey Davis drawled.

"To be fair, it's not really a surprise to see Granger here early. But Weasley?" Blaise Zabini shook his head. "Odd, indeed."

Ron shrugged. "Yeah, you've got me. To be honest, I wouldn't be here at all if I didn't need to take Potions. And coming early? The mere thought of it makes my skin crawl. Unfortunately, it couldn't be avoided. We need to talk to you both."

The two Slytherins stopped a few feet away and started at Ron as if he'd grown a second head.

"Talk to us? What on Earth for?" Davis asked.

"A lot of people say that if one's looking for a rational discussion from a Slytherin, talk to Davis or Zabini," Hermione said with a shrug. "We thought we'd test that theory."

Zabini's eyes narrowed. "Rational discussion? About what?"

"Slytherin's survival this year," Ron said.

When Tracey's hand went for her wand, Hermione sighed and raised her own. She'd had it in her hand since the Slytherins appeared. "It's much too late for that, Davis. Put it away and just listen, hmm?"

When Tracey held up her empty hands to show she was unarmed, Hermione nodded. "Get on with it, Ron. The others will be arriving soon." She glanced down the hall at the large group of students making their way to class.

"All right, you two, this isn't really a discussion. It's actually a warning. Keep your Ferret on a tight leash this year and don't mess with us. Keep your heads down and we'll leave you alone. Step out of line and you'll pay."

"Oh, please! You Gryffindors aren't exactly known for great planning, Weasel." Tracey laughed. "Your house likes to rush in, then act all surprised when you get your asses handed to you."

"I must agree," Blaise replied.

Ron laughed. "And it's that type of thinking that's going to make this year so damn much fun!" He looked at Davis and Zabini, and grinned. "Just do me a favor? When all hell breaks loose, remember this warning, hmm?"

Hermione put her wand away and smiled. "I do believe we're done, here."

Seeing the wariness in Davis and Zabini's eyes, Ron nodded. "So it would seem. We do thank you for your time." He turned away when Neville called his name.

Tracey and Blaise looked at each other, unsure of what had just happened.

Later that evening in the Gryffindor Common Room, the trio sat around a small table.

Ron stretched and closed his book. Looking around, he nearly rolled his eyes when he noticed Hermione with her nose stuck in a book. She'd finished her assignments ages ago.

Turning away from the book worm, he grinned. Harry sat across the table from him working on a new origami project, which wasn't going well, judging by the muttered curses his friend was uttering.

"Problems?" Ron asked him.

"Who knew swans were such perverse animals?" Harry growled. Tossing down his project he looked up at Ron. "Done with your assignments?"

"Yeah. Free for the evening at last."

"Good. I wanted to talk to you about your discussion with Zabini and Davis today."

"Been talking to Hermione, eh?"

"I didn't know it was a secret," Hermione said as she marked her place and closed her book.

"It wasn't." Ron turned to Harry. "So? What about it?"

"One question. Why did you bother?"

Ron laughed. "Simple. After being warned, they won't be able to help themselves. They'll have to try something."

"Which means you've already got something in mind," Harry said.

"Not me, but the twins."

"The orb?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah. The twins wouldn't tell me what it does, just that it wouldn't really harm them."

"And they know this how?" Harry asked.

"They tried it out several times on your house guest. Once they'd perfected it, they sent one to me."

Harry grinned. "This should be interesting."

"I agree," Ron replied.

Hermione picked up her book and shook her head. "Silly me. I keep hoping you two will grow up."

"This is more fun," Ron told her as he reached for his books. He stuffed them into his book bag and shoved the bag under the table. Sitting up, he glanced at Harry, then looked closer. "All right, what's turning through that mind of yours, Potter? I've seen that look too many times."

"Hmm?" Harry asked as his eyes focused on Ron. "Oh, it was nothing. Well, that's not true." Leaning forward, he smiled at Ron. "Can the twins brew Polyjuice?"

"Fred and George, though they like to hide it, are brilliant, Harry," Hermione said. "Some of the jokes they've come up with require some rather difficult brewing. Polyjuice would be child's play to them."

Ron shrugged. "She's right. What did you have in mind?"

Harry grinned. "Thanks to Kreacher, I have all that Dumbledore hair at the summer house and I have this really interesting idea."

"I feel a headache coming on," Hermione muttered.

"At least this way you don't have to brew it," he told her. "Besides, as long as he's not going to make me drink it, I'm game."

"You would be." She sighed and looked at Harry. "What's the idea?"

"Do you still have a way of contacting Rita Skeeter?" he asked.

Her eyes widened. "Oh, that's just evil." She looked between her two best friends, then burst out laughing. "But oh, so perfect!"

"She's in," Ron said, turning to Harry. "So, how do we work this? And who has to drink it?"

"I'm not sure yet. Not us, though. I'm not sure any of us could keep a straight face long enough."

"True. Hey, what about Luna Lovegood?"

Hermione frowned. "Why Luna?"

Ron shrugged. "She's a bit odd, herself. Plus, she doesn't like Skeeter. Not only does the woman work for her father's competitor, but she's said some pretty nasty things about The Quibbler. Pulling a fast one on Rita might just tickle her funny bone."

"Do you think she'd do it?" Harry asked.

"I'm not sure. I don't know her that well, but Ginny does. They spent a lot of time together this summer. We could ask her about Luna."

When Harry and Hermione agreed, Ron got up and went to search for his sister.

"We need to make sure Luna understands that she doesn't have to do this," Harry said quietly. "She's odd, yes, but she gets picked on a lot for it."

"I know, but keep in mind that Luna is brilliant in her own way. Granted, some of the things she comes up with drive me batty, but I think that's why she says them. She's looking for a reaction and finds it amusing when she gets one," Hermione said.

"What makes you say that?"

"Watch her carefully when she says something off the wall. Her eyes...I don't know. It's like she's looking for something from you." She shrugged. "I can't really explain it."

"Hey," Ginny said as she slid into the chair Ron had been using. Her brother stood behind her. "You wanted to talk to me about something?"

Harry told her what they were planning and asked her about Luna. Once Ginny had stopped laughing, she nodded her head.

"Oh, I'm sure Luna would love the idea. She hates Rita. I'll ask her to come to the Common Room tomorrow evening, if you want. You can talk to her about it yourselves."

"Good idea, Ginny. Thanks," Harry said. Grabbing a sheet of paper from a stack he'd been using for origami, he reached for Ron's quill and ink bottle. "Let's see what your brothers have to say about brewing us some Polyjuice. Hedwig will be glad to have something to do."

Hedwig delivered Fred and George's reply the next day at lunch.

"The twins are on board," Harry told Ron, Hermione and Ginny. "They say it will take a few days to get the ingredients and even longer to brew the potion, but they said it's easy to make."

"Easy?" Hermione grumbled.

Ron laughed. "For them, yes. But they never tried to brew it when they were in second year."

"True," she said, somewhat mollified.

"Have you spoken to Luna?" Harry asked Ginny.

"I did. She's coming to the Common Room after dinner tonight."

"Assuming she agrees, when do you want to do this?" Ron asked.

"The potion's going to take a month to brew," Hermione reminded them.

"When is the first Hogsmeade weekend?" Harry asked.

"Middle of November or so," Ginny told him.

Harry looked at his three friends, then shrugged. "That solves the problem of when and where. Hermione, when the time comes to contact Rita, suggest meeting in a private room at the Three Broomsticks on the first Hogsmeade weekend."

Grimmauld Place, September 8th...

THOCK! BUMP! THOCK!

THOCK! BUMP! THOCK!

"No fair!" shouted George as he chased after the ball.

Kreacher sat at the net line and held up a card with a large '9' printed on it, then he pointed to Fred.

"Damn it, Fred!" moaned George.

"Hey, don't blame me. I didn't make the rules for this tennis thing," Fred retorted with a grin. "How's the ball holding up?"

George walked over the ball and canceled the silencing charm.

"I am Lord Lumpypants! Ha! Beat me? I can't be beat! Nah! You will bow and scrape your testicles in fear," shouted the Dark Torso.

George bent over and, with one hand, lifted him up and bounced him a few times. "The elasticity seems to be holding up just fine, but I think our test subject has slipped a few notches below normal."

Fred ran up the court and vaulted over the net. Landing next to George, he poked the Dark Torso a few times.

"Don't touch me, you red headed demon! Bow and grovel before the greatest Lumpypants in the world!" He then began to growl menacingly.

Fred turned to George. "Are you sure it isn't the potion doing this? I mean, he's growling."

George shook his head. "Nah, mate, he was growling before I even gave him the potion."

He paused and looked thoughtfully at Kreacher. "Oi! Bugnuts! What do you do with his nibs here when we're not using him?" he shouted.

Fred blinked and looked at George. "You don't think?"

"I do. I mean, Mum always said we drive her spare, but the Dark Torso is clearly around the bend. We're good, but not that good," replied George.

Kreacher walked over to the pair, his eyes alight with glee as Fred calmly bounced the sputtering Dark Lord like a handball.

"You bellowed for Kreacher, you poor excuses for wizards?" sneered Kreacher.

"Man, Harry's got to put this one down," muttered Fred. "He's creepier than Snape."

"And Dobby is any better? That one is so into Harry, it's scary. The other day, I saw the little blighter planning Harry's harem. He was even compiling a list of girls," replied George.

"Well, I've wanted a harem. Who wouldn't, really?"

"Yeah, but included with Dobby's were nude photos he'd personally taken."

"Evil Dobby," spat Kreacher. "Must stop him somehow or the Master will pick him! I know, Kreacher will show the Master joys of elf sex!"

Everyone, even the Dark Torso, paused and turned to look at Kreacher incredulously.

Fred shook his head and looked at Kreacher with narrowed eyes. "What have you been doing to the Dark Torso when we're not using him?"

Kreacher looked down and mumbled something unintelligible.

"What was that?" asked George.

Kreacher looked up at the pair defiantly. "Dobby and me sing to him."

Fred turned to his brother. "I can't see anything wrong with that mate."

George nodded doubtfully, then turned his attention back to Kreacher. "What kind of songs do you sing?"

Kreacher broke into a wide, and very evil grin.

"It's a world of wonder, a world of fun," he bellowed.

"No! Not a small world!" moaned the Dark Torso. He shook violently for a second, then began to twitch spasmodically. Once the spasms subsided, he looked up at the twins, a beatific smile upon his face. "It's a world of wonder, a world of -"

Ten minutes later, Fred and George huddled in the kitchen, wide eyed and trembling. "Stop humming!" shouted Fred.

"I can't help it!" moaned George. "Obliviate me before it eats my brain!" He then glared when he noticed his brother humming. "Ahh! Stop it!"

Dobby popped into the kitchen and looked at the twins with suspicious eyes. "Kreacher is cheating again," he muttered. "I need to get Harry Potter his harem before Kreacher cheats me out of my position!"

September 10th, Hogwarts Grounds...

The warmth of the day had driven many of the students outside. They sat in groups, studying and talking together, enjoying the sunshine while it lasted.

Hermione, Neville, Harry and Ron decided to head for the lake. Hagrid was down on the shore trying to convince a gaggle of first years that the squid really was harmless. Their dunking in the lake on the night of their arrival still had many of the youngsters wary of the giant cephalopod.

They waved to Ginny, Luna and a group of their friends as they passed them by. Their meeting with Luna in the Gryffindor Common Room had been amusing and the girl had been more than happy to help them.

"Out for a stroll with your boyfriends, Mudblood?" a voice drawled.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Why? You jealous, Draco? Pining for a boyfriend to call your own?" Turning, she faced the blond and his ever-present sidekicks and nearly laughed when he blanched. "What? Did I strike a nerve?"

"I always thought he was gay," Ginny called from her spot with her friends.

"That would explain why he's always so interested in his hair," Luna remarked. "And why Crabbe and Goyle are always with him."

"Thank you for that painful and disturbing mental image, Luna," Harry said.

"You're welcome!" she quipped as she and many other students stood up and made their way closer to Harry and his friends.

Draco's eyes narrowed. "If my father heard you say that..."

"What is it with you?" Ron asked him. "Can't you do anything without your father backing you up? Hell, Draco, you're nothing but a coward. You hide behind Crabbe and Goyle and threaten people with your Death Eater father."

"Who, on the off chance you've forgotten, got his ass kicked by a group of fifth year students," Hermione added. "So tell us, why should we be afraid of someone who can't even beat a group of kids?"

"You've got nothing to brag about, Granger. If I remember correctly, you nearly got yourself sliced in half!" Draco taunted.

"Ah, yes. Dolohov. A shame about that," Ron said, his eyes gleaming. "His untimely death delayed dinner our first night back at school."

"You've got to wonder what was going through his mind when he killed himself," Harry said.

"The train, I would imagine," Hermione replied.

"Oh, I love it when she gets literal," Neville said, laughing.

Harry shook his head. "No, I think he finally realized the truth as he sat in his cell in Azkaban. He may have cut Hermione, but she was healed and walked free. Poor Antonin just couldn't live with the knowledge that a 'Mudblood' had beaten him." He cocked his head at Draco. "But then, you'd understand all about that, wouldn't you Malfoy? Tell me, was Hermione's right hook as painful as it looked when she smashed in your arrogant face and knocked you on your ass?"

When the other students began to laugh, Draco saw red and drew his wand.

He never knew what hit him.

Neville later estimated that Draco had been hit with six stunning spells, two Jelly-Leg jinxes, an Impediment curse, three Incarcerous spells and one new and improved Bat-Bogey hex, which caused much gagging and glares sent Ginny's direction.

Hermione stared down at the unconscious Draco, then looked at Crabbe and Goyle. "You know, if you ask Ginny nicely, I'm sure she'd cast the Bat-Bogey hex on you both. It would save you the trouble of having to mine for them yourselves."

"For Merlin's sake, Hermione! That's just disgusting," Ginny protested.

Hermione pointed at Draco. "And that isn't? Seriously, the old hex wasn't good enough? You had to improve it? I have to ask. Did you make the bogies bigger as to be more painful, or just to gross out your friends?"

"Er, both, really," Ginny admitted.

Neville looked between Crabbe and Goyle. "So, are you going to draw your wands, or drag the Ferret to the infirmary?"

The two young men looked at each other for a moment, then Goyle shrugged. Bending, he picked up Draco and tossed him over his shoulder with a grunt.

Crabbe glared at them for a moment. When he opened his mouth to speak, several people leaned closer to listen.

"When Draco's daddy hears what you've done," he said in a high pitched, rather feminine voice, "you'll pay."

"Wait. Did you just say 'daddy'?" Harry asked. "And what the hell is wrong with your voice?"

"Sounds like someone's squeezing his balls," Dean said, staring at Crabbe.

Ron shook his head. "And that explains why Crabbe never speaks." He looked at Malfoy's minion. "With that voice, how does anyone take you seriously?"

When Crabbe began to speak, Goyle grunted at him, then nodded toward the castle. With one last, fuming look at the other students, Crabbe turned and walked away, Goyle following a few steps behind.

"Well, that was fun," Neville said to no one in particular.

"Oh, the fun's just starting," Harry said, smiling.

"Do I want to know?" Neville asked.

"Remind Ron to tell you about his warning to the Slytherins. You'll understand then."

"Tha' boy jus' doesn' learn," a voice rumbled behind them.

Harry sighed and turned around. "Hello, Hagrid."

Hagrid's gaze went from the retreating Slytherins to Harry. "Yeh never drew yer wand, but yeh goaded him into the fight."

Hermione shook her head. "And calling me a Mudblood wasn't Malfoy's attempt to start something, Hagrid?"

"He's been callin' yeh tha' since you was first years."

"And that makes it right?" Ron asked.

"Wait," Neville cut in. "Let me see if I understand this. Hermione is supposed to ignore insults, but it's all right for Malfoy not to? Is this really what you're saying, Hagrid?"

The first years gathered around the half-giant looked up at him, their eyes questioning.

Hagrid looked down. "O' course not. She should've jus' reported it to Dumbledore."

"I have," Hermione told him, "for five years now. You'll forgive me if I've grown tired of the Headmaster's lack of action against the son of a Death Eater."

Hagrid's head came up. "Now, Hermione," he began.

"Leave it, Hagrid. There's nothing you can say that will excuse Dumbledore's lack of action on this, and many other issues," Harry said firmly. "Malfoy had the choice to walk away. He chose not to and finally paid for his actions."

"I'll have to report this, Harry," Hagrid warned.

"I wouldn't expect anything less from Dumbledore's man," he said quietly. His tone made the title sound like an insult and it wasn't lost on Hagrid, who's shoulders slumped. "Perhaps I made a mistake in second year, helping to get you released from Azkaban."

The hurt mirrored in Hagrid's eyes was clear. "All right, yeh lot," he said, turning away from Harry to address the first years gathered around him. "Lesson's over fer the day."

The expected summons to Dumbledore's office came later that day. It was ignored, of course, which forced the Headmaster to hunt for the young man once more.

Finally finding him in the Hogwarts kitchens, he floated Harry up to his office. Once they were both seated, the Headmaster leaned back on his chair and sighed.

"Would you care to explain why Draco Malfoy is in the infirmary, recovering from spell damage?"

Harry reached over to Dumbledore's dish of lemon drops and popped one in his mouth. "Because he was hit with a spell?" he guessed.

Dumbledore pinched the bridge of his nose. "Why?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. You'd have to ask whomever cast on him."

"Crabbe and Goyle informed me that you started the confrontation."

Harry blinked wide, green eyes. "They spoke? In complete sentences? Well, hell, it looks like the propaganda the Ministry's been spewing about this school is correct! The staff really can teach to apes to talk! Good job, Headmaster!"

Dumbledore leaned forward. "Please answer the question."

"What question?"

"Did you start the confrontation with Mister Malfoy?"

"Which one? I mean, I did free the Death Eater's House Elf back in second year," Harry said, cocking his head slightly. "He wasn't real happy with me."

"With Draco Malfoy!" Dumbledore growled.

"No, no. Draco wasn't there when I freed Dobby," he corrected. "It was the Death Eater Malfoy." He paused for a moment. "Although, now that I think about it, that isn't the distinction it used to be, since Draco's a Death Eater now."

"Mister Potter," the Headmaster warned.

"What? You didn't know?" Harry asked, feigning shock. "There's actually something that goes on in this school that the great Albus Dumbledore isn't aware of? My God, what's next? Talking apes? Oh, wait, we covered that, didn't we?"

When Dumbledore simply stared at him, Harry rose to his feet. "Well, this has been fun, but you did interrupt my meal down in the kitchens." Turning, he made his way to the door.

"Mister Potter, you will serve detention tonight for purposely goading Mister Malfoy into a fight," the Headmaster informed him.

Harry laughed. "I'll consider that, Professor, just as soon as I see Mister Malfoy on his knees in the Great Hall at dinner, begging for Hermione Granger's forgiveness for five years worth of bigotry." Reaching the door, he pulled it open, then looked back at Dumbledore. "Of course, you'll have to be on your knees beside him, for not putting a stop to it when it first started."

With a wave, Harry left the office, closing the door quietly behind him.

Yanking his glasses off, Dumbledore tossed them down on his desk so violently, the lenses broke.

September 11th, morning, Potions classroom...

Snape paced the front of the room, glancing at the door from time to time.

The Gryffindor students sat quietly, though confused, waiting for class to begin.

Snape stopped in front of his desk and looked at the clock. Frowning, he turned to the class. "Open your books to chapter two and begin reading. I will return in a moment. No one is to leave their desks. If I find anyone out of their assigned seat when I return, you will receive a failing grade for the day and detention with Filch this evening."

Glaring around the room until the students had opened their books, he then spun toward the door and marched out.

"Where are the Slytherins?" Neville asked Hermione quietly.

"No idea," she said, "but I'm sure we'll find out soon enough."

Ron rose from his seat and quickly made his way to Snape's desk. Pulling out his wand, he pointed at the Professor's chair and murmured quietly.

When he turned to go back to his seat, he grinned at his fellow Housemates and put a finger to his lips. "Not a word, now."

Seamus grinned "What did you do?"

Ron shrugged as he slid back into his chair. "Eastern sand fleas," he said, "courtesy of my brother, Bill. It's a favorite prank among Egyptian curse breakers."

Parvati looked at Ron, her eyes wide. "But they can't be removed by magic. They have to be picked out of the hair, one by one."

"I know," Ron said as he pulled his Potion book closer.

"And you placed them on his chair?" Dean asked. "That means they'll have to be picked out of his..." He stopped, then gagged at where his thoughts were taking him.

"My God, Ron," Lavender gasped. "That's just...brilliant!"

The Gryffindors began to laugh.

Snape marched in ten minutes later to find his students quietly reading, as he'd told them to. "Class dismissed," he barked. "Everyone get out!"

The students gathered their belongings and bolted from the room.

"It's not that I don't mind having a free period, but what the hell's going on?" Ron asked as he walked up the stairs.

Hermione shook her head. "I don't know." She chewed her lip in thought. "Where's Harry?"

Neville shrugged. "Assuming the Headmaster found him, he should be in Household Magic."

"So, library or Great Hall?" Ron asked.

"Great Hall," Hermione said promptly. "Unless either of you needs to study?"

When both boys looked at her strangely, she stopped and scowled at them. "What? I don't have any assignments, I'm ahead on my reading and I don't feel like putting up with Madam Pince's glaring this early in the day." She growled. "I hate it when people throw off my schedule!"

Neville patted her shoulder comfortingly. "It's all right, Hermione. You can tell the mean, nasty Slytherins all about it, once they've been found."

"Piss off, Neville!"

"Language, Miss Granger," Ron quipped.

When she glared at him, he shuddered back in mock horror. "Right. Never mind. The Great Hall it is," he said, turning to lead the way.

By lunch, the Gryffindors were giving Hermione a wide berth.

When Harry entered the Great Hall, he frowned, seeing that no one was sitting near her. Deciding that caution was the better part of valor, he slid in next to Ron and nodded toward Hermione. "What's that all about?"

"All of her morning classes have been canceled. Our poor little bookworm is suffering educational withdrawals," he murmured.

"Canceled? Why? What have I missed?"

Ron turned in his seat and looked at the Slytherin table. "You haven't noticed?"

Turning to look, Harry frowned at the empty table. "Where are they?"

"No one knows. They didn't show up for Potion class this morning, or any other class, as far as I can tell."

"The whole House? All years?" Harry asked, surprised.

"Yep. I've had three classes canceled this morning. I don't really mind the free time, but it's just odd. And it's not just that," he added, as he pointed to the Head table. "When was the last time we had a meal in here without a Professor present?"

Looking at the Head table, Harry shook his head. "That might explain why Dumbledore's been late in finding me today. And he hasn't been very gentle when he takes me to class, either. He's been practically flinging me at my desk before rushing off."

Turning back to Hermione, he frowned at the dark look on his friend's face. He loved her dearly, but if this kept up for much longer, they'd all pay the price.

Thinking quickly, he hit on an idea and whispered Dobby's name.

When the elf appeared, Harry turned slightly and murmured quietly to him for a moment. When Dobby nodded and disappeared, he turned back to the table and began to fill his plate.

When he heard the small pop of Dobby's return, he glanced at Hermione. The elf had placed a book bag in front of her and smiled. When she said something to him, Dobby shrugged, bowed, then popped away.

Opening the bag, Hermione pulled out two old and dusty books. Brushing them off lightly, her eyes widened and she looked at Harry.

Picking up his glass, he lifted in salute and winked.

Laughing, she shook her head at him, then looked down and opened the first book.

"Nicely done," Ron murmured. "I wasn't looking forward to spending time in the Common Room tonight."

Harry looked around at the rest of his Housemates, most of whom were grinning at him. Shrugging, he reached for his fork. "It's easier this way. We'd have only pissed her off more once she realized we were all hiding from her."

By dinner that evening, the school was abuzz with rumors. No one had seen a single Slytherin all day and all classes had been canceled after lunch.

Filing into the Great Hall and seeing the Headmaster standing alone at the Head table, the students rushed to their seats.

Once the Hall had quieted, Dumbledore cleared his throat. "As I'm sure you are all aware, there was some trouble in Slytherin House. Professor Snape discovered this morning that the students had all come down with a mysterious illness. It was serious enough to overtax the school's ability to handle, and they have all been transferred to St. Mungo's for care, as a result.

"We do not yet know what has caused the illness, or if it is contagious. As such, any student who begins to feel ill should report to Madam Pomfrey immediately. Symptoms include dizziness, blurred vision, head and stomach pains, vomiting, diarrhea, euphoria and the repeated singing of the Hogwarts school song."

An owl winged into the Hall and all eyes turned to watch the bird's flight. It landed in front of Ron Weasley and he reached out to remove its burden.

Clearing his throat to regain the student's attention, Dumbledore rubbed his hand over his bald head. "The staff is exhausted after dealing with the care and transfer of the sick and I have given them tomorrow off to rest. Classes will resume the day after tomorrow. Until then, all students are restricted to their Common Rooms, the library and the Great Hall, which will be used for meals, only. As soon as you have finished dinner, you are excused for the evening."

Stepping back, the Headmaster gazed around the Great Hall one more time, then shuffled toward the door.

"I hope it's not contagious," Ginny said as the Headmaster stepped out of the Hall.

"It's not," Ron replied as he looked up from the folded parchment in his hand.

"How do you know?" Hermione asked.

"The twins," he told her. At her puzzled expression, he squirmed in his seat. "Remember the orb?"

Hermione's eyes widened and Harry began to laugh.

"What orb?" Ginny asked. "What are you talking about?"

"Something our brothers came up with," he said, looking at her.

"This doesn't sound good," Neville commented.

"Well, not for Slytherin, at any rate," Ginny said. "So, what did they do?" she asked Ron.

After explaining the orb to Ginny and Neville, he shrugged. "Following the instructions they gave me, I activated the orb last night, just before I went to sleep."

"And it made them sick? All of them?" Hermione asked, a bit shocked at the scale of the twins creation.

"That's not all it did," he muttered, then held the parchment out to her.

Taking it, she unfolded the note and her jaw dropped. "Oh, my," she finally murmured, letting the note fall to the table. In her hand were a stack of photos. "How did they manage this?" She flipped through the snapshots, then passed them to Harry.

Taking them, Harry burst out laughing. The first picture showed Malfoy, Zabini and Parkinson. Draco and Blaise had their arms wrapped around each other and looked to be singing passionately to each other. Pansy was clutching her stomach as she puked on them both. None of them seemed to be terribly upset over the fact that they were covered in vomit.

The rest of the photos were similar, only with different people. The last photo was a wide shot of the Common Room. The floor, furnishings and even the walls seemed to be covered in bile.

Passing the photos to Ginny, Harry then reached for the parchment Hermione had dropped.

"Well, according to this," he said a few moments later, "once activated, the orb was spelled to discharge a vapor into the Slytherin Common Room. Two hours later, it started taking pictures." He shook his head. "They apologize, saying that they could only get it to take fifteen shots. They then used Dobby to retrieve the orb. They developed the images today and sent them to Ron."

He looked up at Hermione. "This is way beyond me. How did they manage to do all this with one little orb?"

"You're asking me?" she blurted. She turned to Ron and scowled. "They tanked their OWLs on purpose!"

"Don't scowl at me," he shot back. "I had nothing to do with their OWLs."

Muttering darkly about having a long chat with the twins someday, she ignored the laughter at the Gryffindor table as the pictures were passed around.

Morning, September 13th...

Snape stood quietly at the front of the room as the Gryffindors found their seats. Once the class had settled, he looked down his long nose and stared at them for a moment.

"As half of our class is still absent, we will not be brewing p-potions until their return. As such, you are to continue reading chapter two. I will expect a report on what little information you dunderheads manage to retain from your reading by next Wednesday. Well? Open your books and begin!"

Once they'd pulled out their books, he made his way to his desk and sat down. Pulling last week's homework assignments from a drawer, he began his marking.

Ron glanced up now and then to watch the Professor. When the man began to squirm in his chair, he bit his lip and looked back down at his book.

He wasn't the only one who was watching the Professor. Eyes flicked back and forth between books and the Professor often as the class wore on. When they were dismissed sometime later, most

were disappointed. The Professor had shifted a bit in his chair now and then, but that was all.

Walking from the class, Ron frowned in thought, trying to remember everything his brother told him about the spell he'd used. In the end, he could only conclude that he'd messed up his casting.

At lunch, Harry and Hermione tried to console him.

"I'm sure if you write Bill, he could tell you where you went wrong," Hermione said. "It can't be an easy spell. Eastern sand fleas aren't native to Britain, after all."

"Don't worry about it, mate," Harry added. "He's still stuttering, isn't he?" He looked up at the Head table, his eyes finding Snape. The staff had returned to eating in the Great Hall yesterday at dinner.

"Yeah," Ron said, somewhat cheered by that fact, as his eyes followed Harry's.

Snape shifted on his chair several times throughout the meal. He and McGonagall spoke in low tones several times and the Deputy Headmistress's expression became more pinched as the meal went on.

As the students finished lunch and began to gather their belongings, McGonagall's patience finally ended.

"For Merlin's sake, Severus, be still," she snapped loudly.

"I can't!" Snape cried. Leaping to his feet, he hauled his robe up to his armpits and dug at the waistband of his pants. "It itches!"

Obviously distraught, the man dropped his pants to his ankles and his hands dove into his undergarments to scratch vigorously at his genitals. "Oh, Merlin, it itches!"

"Severus!" Minerva shrieked. "Remember where you are!"

Dropping into his chair, the man stretched out his legs and continued to scratch himself. "The itch...it burns...Oh, God, that feels good," he moaned, finally finding some relief as he continued to dig at himself.

When the laughter echoing off the walls finally registered, Snape looked around and blanched. The Professors were on their feet, staring at him in horror, while the students were pointing at him and laughing uproariously.

When the light of a camera's flash went off, Snape leaped to his feet, removed his hands from his underwear and slammed his palms on the table. "Give me that camera, you little...Oh, shit!" He turned away suddenly and began to scratch himself again. "Merlin, make it stop!"

"All students are to report to their classes," Dumbledore yelled over the laughter. "Now," he finally bellowed when no one moved.

Once the Hall was clear, he turned to Snape. "What is going on?" he snapped.

"He was squirming all through lunch," Minerva said, scowling down at the man in question.

"Severus?" Dumbledore asked. "Do you have an explanation for this?"

The man was too distraught to answer. He continued to scratch and mumble to himself.

Sighing, Dumbledore reached up to stroke his beard. When his hand touched the smooth skin of his chin, he scowled. Damm it, I miss my beard! "Let's get him to the infirmary, Minerva," he ordered. "Maybe Poppy can figure this out."

Twenty minutes later, Poppy stepped out from behind the curtain she'd drawn around Snape's bed and approached Albus and Minerva.

"Eastern sand fleas," she reported, shaking her head in disgust. "And with all the scratching he's been doing, the skin is broke open and raw."

Albus winced. "That means a soak in - " He shuddered.

"That's right. A two hour soak in oatmeal and wintergreen oil," Poppy confirmed.

"Why does he need to soak in that?" Minerva asked.

"Eastern sand fleas are nearly impossible to spot," the mediwitch told her. "They're very small to begin with, and they act almost like chameleons, in that they match the skin tone of their host. The soak is necessary. The oatmeal smothers them, while the wintergreen oil counteracts their chameleon abilities, making them visible so they can be plucked out."

"Why can't you just remove them with magic?" McGonagall asked.

Dumbledore shook his head. "They're immune to magic. It's actually rather fascinating."

"Severus would beg to differ," Poppy said tartly.

Minerva looked toward the curtained off area, then back to the mediwitch. "But wintergreen oil, in that particular area? Won't that be painful?"

"It's going to burn like dragon fire," she stated. "And burn creams don't work on that kind of pain." She turned to Dumbledore. "You do realize I'm going to have to pluck him bald, don't you?"

"What?" Minerva gasped. "Why?"

"Eastern sand fleas are black, the same color as Severus' hair. To ensure I've gotten those not attached to the skin, the hair has to go." She turned to Dumbledore and raised an eyebrow.

"I understand, but it must be done," he told her.

Poppy threw her hands in the air. "You don't pay me enough for this! Can't you send him to St. Mungo's?"

"I think it would be better to keep this as quiet as possible, don't you? Severus will be embarrassed enough by this," he told her sternly.

"Give her a raise, Albus!" an anguished voice called from behind the curtain. "I don't need a angry witch between my legs, you rotten bastard!"

Dumbledore flinched, but didn't speak.

Poppy's expression darkened. "Fine," she snapped. "But you owe me, Albus. You owe me big!" Spinning on her heel, she marched to the infirmary's bathroom to prepare the soak.

"I think that's our cue to leave," Dumbledore said. Turning, he walked quickly to the doors.

Minerva watched him retreat, then looked back at the door Poppy had disappeared through. "Not a bad idea," she muttered. "Poppy's going to be angry for days, after this."

Great Hall, September 18th, breakfast...

Ron slid into a spot next to Harry at the Gryffindor table, a scowl on his face. "I see the Slytherins are back with us."

"Rumor has it they were brought back to the school two days ago. I guess they figure it's safe to release the snakes into the general population," Harry said as he reached for a platter of eggs. "They still look a bit green, though."

"They do match their House colors nicely," Seamus said with a laugh.

"And their Head of House is still wincing when he walks," Parvati pointed out.

Ron grinned. "Remind me to thank Bill for that."

"And I think we should all thank Colin," Hermione added as she buttered a piece of toast. "I was one of the first down to breakfast this morning. It would seem our little Colin is growing up into a polite young man. He gave each Slytherin a present to welcome them back."

"What was it?" Lavender asked.

"A wonderful picture of their Head of House digging at his genitals," she replied before taking a bite.

Laughter rang out at the Gryffindor table, causing many heads to turn their way.

"Think they know we were involved?" Harry asked a few moments later.

"That lot? Of course they do, Harry," Hermione told him. "Even if we weren't, they'd still blame us."

"I wonder how long it will take them to try to strike back," Dean mused.

"Oh, I don't think they'll have much time for that," Lavender told him, pouring herself a second cup of tea.

Harry stared at her for a moment, then looked around. Most of the Gryffindor girls were grinning. "All right. What have you lot done?"

"Us?" Ginny asked, her eyes twinkling. "Why would you think we've done anything?"

"Because he knows us?" Hermione asked.

The girls began to laugh. It wasn't a pleasant sound.

Just then, a shriek came from the Slytherin table and people began turning and standing up to see what the commotion was all about.

Millicent Bulstrode shrieked again, jumped to her feet and began yanking on her robe. The robe appeared to be shrinking in width, though not in length. It wasn't long before the girl resembled a rather lumpy sausage.

Finally able to get hold of the wayward garment, Millicent ripped it from her body. Reaching out, she grabbed the table to steady herself and began to pant. The Slytherin girls moved toward her, concerned, while the boys began to snicker.

Everyone froze when she began to shriek once more.

"Merlin, I hate being short," Ginny muttered, unable to see over or around all the people standing to watch the spectacle. In frustration, she finally climbed up on the bench to get a clear view.

When Millicent began to grab at her clothing, many people groaned. No one wanted to see her without clothes on.

Their wants didn't enter into the girl's mind, however, as she ripped the constricting garments from her body and stood buck-ass naked in front of her schoolmates and the staff. Moving quickly, her friends did their best to shield her nakedness from prying eyes, while her male Housemates began to make lewd comments about Millicent's hidden attributes.

Neville blanched. "Well, there's no accounting for taste, I suppose," he muttered. "Merlin, I'm never going to get that image out of my mind." He shuddered and turned away.

"I wouldn't, just yet," Hermione murmured to him quietly.

He looked at her oddly, ready to ask what she meant, when several more shrieks bounced off the stones of the Great Hall.

"I'm going to be deaf soon if they keep doing that," Ron grouched. "Now what's the problem?"

Snape had started moving toward the Slytherin table, but had stopped to gape when, one by one, the girls in his House began to pull and yank on their robes.

"A little p-p-privacy, if you don't mind, Headmaster?" Snape bellowed as he moved quickly toward the Slytherin table.

"What?" Dumbledore asked, bemused, as he watched the girls begin to rip their clothing off.

"Albus!" Minerva snapped.

Receiving no reply, she cast a Sonorus charm on herself and stood on her chair. "All students are to leave the Hall immediately! Get to class, all of you!"

The students began to gather their belongings and move toward the exit, many walking backward so as to watch the now naked, weeping girls as Snape tried to shield them from prying eyes.

The Slytherin boys, it was noted by many, were the last to leave. Their gawking, laughing and lewd comments actually caused Snape to issue a mass detention for every male in his House.

Once the students had left, Minerva whirled to face Albus. "You randy old goat! You will stop staring at those poor girls this instant."

"I was just curious, Minerva," he mumbled. "An intriguing spell, isn't it?"

"Leave, Albus," she thundered. "As you're obviously no help, get out!"

Shaking his head as though trying to clear his mind, Dumbledore looked down at her. "You don't honestly think I was ogling the poor dears, do you?" His eyes twinkled, though his expression was one of hurt.

"You're a pervert, Albus. Now do as I said! Severus and I will tend to this."

Sighing, he turned away. "No one understand me," he murmured.

At lunch, many of the girls from other Houses had converged on their Slytherin counterparts, offering sympathy. They also planted the seeds of distrust and dissent.

Standing near the doors to the Hall, Hannah Abbott, a Prefect in Hufflepuff, patted Daphne Greengrass on the shoulder and shook her head. "For what it's worth, the girls of Hufflepuff tore into our male House mates last night. We're pretty sure they didn't have anything to do with the prank, but their behavior was appalling," she said scathingly. "House rivalries aside, common decency should have sent them out of the Hall as soon as they realized what was happening."

"I have to agree," Lisa Turpin said as she joined them. "And I can assure you that no boy in Ravenclaw had anything to do with this. Much like our Hufflepuff sisters, we made sure of that."

"That just leaves Gryffindor," Daphne spat. She caught the look that passed between Susan and Lisa and demanded to know what was going on.

"Well, it's just something we heard," Lisa said hesitantly.

"What have you heard?" Millicent asked as she pushed her way into the group.

"Give me a moment, Millicent," Susan said as she stood on her toes and looked around. Spotting who she was looking for, she waved. "It might best if you heard it for yourselves."

A few moments later, Eleanor Branstone and Laura Madley, two third year Hufflepuffs joined them, looking a bit nervous to be among so many upperclassmen.

Susan smiled reassuringly at the younger girls. "Would you tell Daphne and Millicent what you heard this morning?"

Laura's eyes widened and she looked ready to bolt.

"It's all right," Lisa said, trying to calm her. "Just tell them exactly what you heard. Despite what the Gryffindors would have you believe, the Slytherins are not monsters. Just be honest."

Eleanor glanced at Laura, who still looked scared, and took a step forward. "Laura and I were some of the last to leave the Hall this morning. Someone had kicked her bag over on their way out and it took us a bit to gather her stuff. When we left, we walked passed a group of boys and they were talking about what had just happened in the Great Hall. They were laughing about it, and several of them were begging two of the others to teach them the spell they used on you. One boasted he was going to use it on his girlfriend the next time she got above herself."

Frowning, Eleanor looked at Susan. "What does that mean, anyway?"

Susan smiled. "I'll explain it to you later."

Millicent's face resembled a thunderstorm. "And who were these boys you saw?"

"I don't know their names," Eleanor said.

"Could you point them out?" Daphne asked quietly.

"We could try," Laura said. Turning, she looked toward the Slytherin table and starting pointing out the boys she'd seen.

Eleanor confirmed her choices.

"Thank you both for your help," Lisa said.

"You should both get back to the table before lunch is over," Susan added.

Nodding, the third years turned and walked away.

Susan looked at Daphne and Millicent. "The girls told this to me between classes. I've never known them to lie, but I'm not sure if the boys in your House are capable of doing something like this."

"Slytherin doesn't mean stupid!" Millicent snapped.

Lisa sighed. "I don't think that's what she meant. Look, I don't know how things work in your House, and I'm not asking to know. But the guys in Ravenclaw would never think of pranking the girls in their own House. They'd know we'd find out it was them. Nor would they do something this cruel and mean spirited to their own Housemates."

Susan shrugged. "In any case, you now know what we know. Use the information as you see fit. I'm going to get lunch before class starts." She walked toward the Hufflepuff table and waved at Hannah, who was saving her a seat.

Nodding to the two Slytherins, Lisa turn toward her own House table and walked away.

"What do you think, Daph?" Millicent asked as she watched the two girls rejoin their friends.

"I'm not sure, but something Eleanor said keeps going through my mind."

"What's that?"

Daphne looked at her and cocked her head. "How many times have we heard Draco tell Pansy that she was getting above herself?"

Millicent's eyes narrowed and she looked at the boys seated at their table. "Harper, Vaisey, Urquhart, Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle and Nott?"

"Turpin was right about something else, as well," Daphne added. "This little prank was cruel and mean spirited. It also took planning. Let's face facts, Millie. The Gryffindors are more likely to change our hair color or hit us with stink bombs at the spur of the moment. They seem unable to plan anything. They just act on impulse. That's why they always get trounced so badly."

She looked at the boys sitting at the table. "No, this took planning to pull off. No Gryffindor is capable of something like this."

"We can't let them get away with it, Daphne," Millicent growled.

"Nor will we. Come on. Let's go talk to the other girls."

The next morning, not a single Slytherin boy showed up for breakfast.

The fact was not lost on their Head of House. Standing, he approached the table and spoke with Pansy for a moment before leaving the Hall.

"Wonder what's going on there?" Dean said as he watched Snape leave.

"You were right," Hermione said to Parvati, who sat across from her. "Lisa and Susan got it done." She slid a galleon across the table.

Parvati scooped up the coin and grinned. "Now we just have to wait to find out what happened."

Ron looked between the two, then turned to Harry. "Am I the only one lost here?"

Harry shook his head. "No. I would say everyone not of the female gender is as lost as you are. But don't worry. The girls will tell us when they're ready."

"My, aren't you blasé this morning," Seamus remarked. "I thought you and Ron would be demanding answers from them."

"Do we look stupid to you?" Ron asked. "Anger that lot if you want. I like my head where it's at."

Dean laughed. "I think he was hoping you'd walk into the line of fire so he didn't have to."

"Something like that," Seamus muttered.

"Look," Ginny said quietly, pointing at the entrance to the Hall.

Snape had returned and was rushing toward the Head table. Once there, he leaned down and spoke with Dumbledore for a moment.

The Headmaster stood abruptly and said something to McGonagall and Flitwick.

"Merlin, I hope the Slytherins aren't puking again," Neville said.

As Snape, Dumbledore and McGonagall left the Hall, Flitwick stood on his chair. With the help of a Sonorus charm, he announced that classes were canceled for the day. He flicked his wand to cut the spell, then climbed down from his chair and gathered the other teachers. A moment later, they all moved toward the doors.

Hermione's eyes narrowed as she watched Daphne Greengrass stand up and walk to the Ravenclaw table. She stopped next to Lisa Turpin and spoke with her for a few moments before returning to her seat.

Lisa's expression was blank, but her eyes were wide with shock. Standing, she walked quickly to the Hufflepuff table, where she spoke quietly with Susan Bones. When she was done, she returned to her own table and spoke with several of the girls there.

"I wish they'd hurry," Lavender grumbled.

"It can't look too obvious," Ginny said as she pushed her plate away and folded her arms on the table.

"Here comes Luna now," Hermione murmured.

"Thanks for letting me borrow your notes, Ginny," Luna said, holding out a piece of parchment. "My bag was infested with Three-toed Glitter Bugs and they left so many tracks on my notes I couldn't read them."

"Three-toed Glitter Bugs?" Hermione asked, then regretted it.

Luna nodded. "They're only visible by moonlight during a leap year."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Glitter Bugs? That's the best you could come up with?" she asked quietly.

The blond squirmed a bit. "I was in a hurry. Deal with it." Turning, she returned to her table.

Shaking her head, Ginny looked down at the parchment. She froze for a moment, then quickly slapped a hand over her mouth and shoved Luna's note at Hermione.

Taking the parchment, Hermione's lips quirked. "Oh, my," she said, then bit her lip.

"Mind sharing?" Harry said.

"It seems the girls of Slytherin did a little digging into who caused their unfortunate wardrobe problem yesterday morning."

"Oh? And who are the responsible parties?" Seamus asked.

Hermione looked up. "The Slytherin boys."

Ron frowned. "But didn't you tell us last night that you and the other girls were the ones who..." He broke off when Hermione's eyes went flat and cold. "Er, right. The Slytherin boys are responsible. How..um...awful."

Dean looked between Hermione and Ron and shook his head. "So, why are the Slytherin boys absent?"

"Apparently, the girls got revenge last night," Hermione told him.

"For Merlin's sake, Hermione," Lavender groused. "Get to the bloody point. What did the girls do to them?"

Hermione stared at Ron for a moment. "Eastern sand fleas."

Ron's jaw dropped. "No way!"

Nodding, she held out the parchment.

Ron snatched it from her hand, read it, then began to laugh. "Oh, Merlin! I think they've outsmarted themselves this time!"

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

Parvati blanched. "The boys will have to be deloused, which is a rather painful process. But the girls will, at the very least, have to be examined." She looked at Ron. "You do realize they'll probably fumigate Slytherin House, don't you?"

"Yep!" he said cheerfully.

Harry began to laugh. "If the girls end up having to be examined, they're just going to hate the boys even more."

"And the boys are sure to figure out that the girls are the ones who did this to them," Seamus said, his eyes wide as he realized what was happening.

Dean looked at Hermione, Ginny, Lavender and Parvati. He stood abruptly and bowed to them. "Masterfully done, ladies. Brilliant. You've just removed Slytherin House from the equation."

As he sat back down, the girls all preened.

Harry looked at Seamus and grinned. "Now do you understand why we do our best not to make them angry at us?"

Authors Notes:

For all our wonderful reviewers, there's eighty pounds of various types of cookies, as well as coffee, tea and llama milk. Dig in folks and thanks for reading!

~ Bob's note.

Sorry those cookies are mine! Get your own.

Disclaimer:

Alyx sat at her computer, chewing on her lower lip thoughtfully.

Bob watched her for a few moments, then rolled his eyes. "What's the problem this time?"

She tilted her head a bit and stared at her screen. "We've both gone to a lot of trouble to inform people that this is a crack fic, right?"

"Yes."

She sighed. "So I'm wondering if I should warn them that there's a bit of non-crack in this chapter?"

He stared at her for a moment, then began to grin.

"What?" she asked.

"The words non-crack sort of lead one to the word 'crackless'," he said, then laughed.

She scowled at him. "It's not crackless. Hell, the chapter's mostly crack. There's a just a bit of non-crack included."

He laughed harder.

"What?" she snapped.

"Crackless! Funny word. Leads one to all sorts of interesting visuals," he chortled.

She rolled her eyes. "You're such a child, Robert."

"You're thinking up juvenile ways of telling the readers that we don't own Harry Potter, yet I'm the child?" He asked, grinning at her.

"Yes, you're the child. I am a writer," she said huffily.

He leaned back on his chair and howled with laughter.

Shaking her head, Alyx pressed a button on her desk and watched as the back of Bob's chair collapsed, causing him to flip backwards and spill to the floor.

"What? How?" he gasped as he clutched his aching head.

She rolled her eyes. "As you pointed out, I write the disclaimers. That means I know everything you're going to do." She grinned. "I guess you could say I control every single one of your actions."

As his eyes widened in horror, she turned to the readers. "Enjoy the chapter."

Headmaster's office, later that day...

"I will not do it, Albus. I won't!" Poppy exclaimed.

When Dumbledore's lips twitched, Poppy made a fist and shook it at him. "If you think, after examining each one, that I'm going to delouse the boys of Slytherin House, you've got another thing coming, old man! I've seen enough male genitalia this week to make me seriously consider batting for the home team!"

Snape rubbed his face tiredly. "Have the girls been examined yet?"

Poppy whirled on him and glared. "Not yet. But they share a Common Room, Severus. You know it's very likely that they've been infected, as well. And before you ask, I will not delouse them, either!"

Minerva shook her head. "We're going to have to fumigate the dungeons."

Flitwick groaned. "How on Earth did this happen?"

When everyone turned to glare at Snape, the man cringed back. "Don't look at me like that!"

"You were the first," Minerva spat.

"Yes, but the students of my House were in St. Mungo's at the time," he protested. "They came back after I'd been treated."

"He's right," Septima Vector said.

"Oh, Merlin. Do you realize what this means?" Pomona Sprout exclaimed. "It's not just the dungeons. We have to fumigate the entire castle!"

Dumbledore looked at Poppy for confirmation.

"I'm afraid she's right, Albus. It's the only way to make sure," the mediwitch said, her shoulders slumping.

"Very well," Dumbledore said quietly. "I'll make some calls. While Poppy attends to the Slytherin students..."

"No!" Poppy bellowed and drew her wand. "I'll hex you into next week if you say it, Albus! They go to St. Mungo's or I swear I'll curse you with the pox!"

"I was merely thinking of the student's on this issue, Poppy. Imagine their embarrassment and try to be more sympathetic."

A vein stood out on Pomfrey's forehead. "Imagine the Headmaster of Hogwarts explaining to the press how he came down with the pox. I tell you, Albus, I will not do it!"

"Fine," he muttered gracelessly. "Send them to St. Mungo's! I will explain the situation to the students at dinner tonight and, with any luck, announce the date of fumigation."

After dinner that evening, Poppy visited each Common Room to speak to the students and hand out information on signs of Eastern sand flea infestation. She was relieved to report to the Headmaster that the other Houses seemed to be clean of sand fleas.

Later, many students remarked among themselves that the mediwitch seemed to have developed a rather distracting eye twitch.

September 21st...

Harry made his way out of the castle earlier than usual and was surprised to see the Hogwarts elves already setting up tents on the grounds.

The day was chilly, but clear.

Weaving his way through the busy creatures, he found a spot far enough from the activity so as not to be in the way. Then he called for Dobby.

When the elf appeared, he had a rather large trunk with him and was bouncing on his toes.

Seeing Dobby's excitement, he laughed. "Is everything ready?"

"Yes, Harry Potter! Everything you asked for is in the trunk. Shall Dobby start?"

Harry looked around, then shrugged. "Might as well. I think we should be finished before anyone else makes it out here."

Bending down, he opened the trunk, then blinked. "How big is this thing?"

"As big as it needs to be to fit everything Harry Potter asked for," Dobby said, peering over the edge of the trunk.

Digging around for a few minutes, he finally straightened and growled in frustration. "How am I supposed to find anything in here?"

The elf made a shooing motion. "Let Dobby do it. Dobby knows where everything is."

Moving away, Harry watched as Dobby waved his hands around a bit wildly. Things came flying out of the trunk so fast that he actually ducked.

A tent appeared first and came to rest a few feet away, already set up. Into it flew clothing, books, food, bedding and a host of other things too small for Harry to identify.

Long planks of wood flew by next and began to assemble itself off to one side of the tent. He watched the structure build itself in record time.

When he heard the trunk slam shut, he turned back to Dobby and found the elf grinning and patting a bag that now sat on the trunk's lid.

"Is this what Harry Potter was looking for?" he asked.

Moving back to the trunk, he picked up the bag and looked inside. "This is it. Thanks, Dobby."

The elf bounced on his toes again. "Can Dobby watch from the tent?"

"Why not?" Harry said with a laugh.

The orderly exit of students began two hours later. They'd been given their sleeping assignments at breakfast.

Leaving the castle, the students found tents set up along dorm lines and were informed that their belongings had already been transferred to their assigned tents. The Hogwarts kitchen had been set up in a large tent off to one side and, as they watched, the House tables appeared in front of it.

Once their Heads of House told them to find their tents, Harry slipped away.

Twenty minutes later, a rhythmic booming sound reverberated over the grounds. Weaving in and out of the beat was a strange undulating sound.

Ron bolted from his tent and met Hermione coming out of the tent across from his.

"What is he doing?" he exclaimed, clapping his hands over his ears.

"I've no idea," she said, turning around until she's found the source of the music. She tilted her head and pointed. "Why don't we go ask him?"

She wasn't the only one to have spotted Harry. The entire living population of Hogwarts was quickly making their way toward him, students, staff and elves.

When he was close enough to see Harry clearly, Ron began to laugh.

His best friend stood on a huge stage dressed in the most absurd clothing he'd ever seen. He wore a grass skirt, a vest made of some type of animal skin, heavy boots covered in fur and had feathers sticking out of his hair.

He held a wooden staff so new, it still smelled of sap. Around the staff were several rings that rattled as he shook it.

He dipped and swayed and shook his staff. He wailed loudly, his voice weaving around the heavy beat of an unseen drum.

"Harry!" Hermione called. "What are you doing?"

He shook his staff at her and exclaimed, "Ooga-booga!"

"Harry!"

He stopped wailing enough to say, "The Euro-Indy-Asiatic Rain Dance, Hermione!"

"Of course! How could I not recognize it?" she asked, rolling her eyes.

"Because you need to get out more," he told her, then held out his hand to his fellow students. "Anyone brave enough to join me?"

With a giggle, Parvati took his hand and let him pull her up on stage. He showed her the steps and they began to wail and sway together.

That was all it took to get the majority of the student body up on stage as the staff looked on, bewildered.

Twenty minutes later, the sky darkened, thunder cracked and the rain fell in sheets. Everyone looked at Harry in awe and he preened.

"Am I good, or what?"

Two days later, they were looking at him with loathing. It hadn't stopped raining and was, in fact, coming down harder.

Sitting at the tarp covered Gryffindor table, he looked at his friends sheepishly. "I guess I could try a Sun Dance," he mumbled.

September 30th, Evening, Gryffindor Common Room...

Hermione looked down at her Transfiguration assignment and shoved it away in disgust.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked. He was seated across from her at the table in the Common Room, but never looked up from the paper he was folding into the shape of a giraffe.

"Dunno, but she nearly spilled my ink," Ron grouched, glaring at her.

Ignoring the glare, Hermione shook her head. "What's the point?"

"The point of what?" Ron asked.

"This!" she exclaimed, pointing at her homework. "Honestly, does it matter? It's not like we won't be failing this year."

Harry looked up, his concern evident. "You don't have to do this, you know."

"Don't start," she growled. "I do have to do this. We all do. It's just that, I get back to this school and suddenly feel the need to push. I need to write more than the assignment asks for, go into more detail, get better grades..." She sighed and put her head in her hands.

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to prove yourself," Ron said as he capped his ink. "Your problem is, you're trying to prove yourself to the wrong people."

Her head came up and she stared at him, puzzled.

Ron shook his head. "Your parents know how smart you are and how hard you work. Harry and I know you're a brilliant witch who will have a bright future in our world. Your friends know they can come to you for help and that you make a wonderful Prefect. You don't have to prove anything to anyone who matters. The problem is, you're trying to prove something to people who will never look past the fact that you're a muggle-born and, therefore, beneath them in every way."

She looked at him helplessly and he shrugged. "Until you come to realize the facts, you'll continue to do your homework, jump when a teacher says jump and do that little bit extra that everyone has come to expect of you."

Her eyes narrowed. "You don't think I can do this. You don't think I'll follow through."

"No," Harry said as he placed his paper giraffe on the table and looked at her. "He and I both know you can. You're doubting yourself."

"This summer built a sort of cocoon around us. Alone, we could plan this out and not worry about what it would actually mean once we got back to school. But now, being here, and knowing you'll be facing the disapproval and outright anger of the Professors? Knowing that Dumbledore is going to be furious with you?" He cocked his head slightly and smiled when he saw the unease in her eyes. "Planning to overthrow the school is fun on paper, but the reality is something much more difficult."

Ron leaned in and smiled at her. "Think of it this way, Hermione," he said quietly. "The girl who helped take down the Dark Lord and who helped clean out the trash at Hogwarts is going to be able to write her own ticket in this world. No one doubts your intelligence. Once this is over, no one will doubt your willingness to do what needs to be done, even if it means sacrificing something you love so dearly," he concluded, waving a hand toward her books.

Harry and Ron watched as her shoulders straightened and her head came up. "You're right," she said, reaching for her books. "And as much as I needed to hear what you both just said, that wasn't really what I was asking."

"Oh?" Harry asked curiously.

"What I was wondering was, what's the point in doing assignments if we're going to be starting Phase Two soon."

"We do them because it's expected of us," Ron said as he put his finished assignments away and packed everything into his book bag. "If we slack off, it sort of gives it away, doesn't it?"

Hermione looked at Harry. "Well? When do we start? Dumbledore's going to keep floating you to classes, and while I'm sure it's made a small dent in his social calendar, it certainly hasn't changed his mind about you."

He shrugged. "How about tomorrow?"

"What?" Ron yelped. "Harry, I just finished my damn homework! You couldn't have said something earlier?"

Harry laughed and stood up. "I'm off to bed. See you both in the morning!" Grabbing his giraffe, he walked toward the stairs.

"Asshole," Ron muttered, kicking his book bag. "He did that on purpose."

Hermione watched Harry leave the room. "It seems that way, doesn't it?"

"Are you up for this?" he asked her seriously.

She looked at him, then grinned. "Yes, I think I am. After all, a girl needs a well-rounded education, and that should include how to raise a little hell now and then."

October 1st, Breakfast...

Breakfast was a quiet affair for the trio. Though they didn't talk much, they did grin at each other from time to time. Once they'd finished eating, they left the hall with a group of other students, but quickly separated from them. Stepping out of the school, they blinked at the brightness of the day and headed for the lake.

Harry sat down under a tree and leaned back against it. "This will do for me. I'll see you both later?"

Nodding, Hermione and Ron walked away from Harry, each going in a different direction.

"It won't take long to find them once their absence is reported," Harry murmured to himself. Closing his eyes, he squirmed around,

scratching his back on the rough tree bark and sighed in relief. "At least it will annoy the old man."

Ten minutes later, he heard the Headmaster approaching and roused himself enough to crack one eye open.

"Ah, there you are, Mister Potter." Dumbledore smiled at the young man, then looked around curiously. "You've chosen a lovely spot this morning. I believe this will be one of our last warm days of the season. You'll have to find some place in the castle to wait for me to escort you to class."

Harry flopped around rather ungracefully until he was laying flat on his back. Opening both eyes, he smiled up at the Headmaster. "Oh, I doubt that. A few snow forts built around the castle and I should be nice and cozy while waiting for you. Though I doubt you'll enjoy trudging through the snow to get me, I'll find it very amusing."

Sighing, the Headmaster drew his wand and, with a few flicks, had Harry floating. "I see. Well, as you won't change your mind, I'm sure I'll manage. Shall we?"

Harry waved a hand airily. "By all means. I so look forward to napping in class today."

Floating behind Dumbledore, Harry stretched lightly, then closed his eyes, figuring he could get a head start on his nap.

His arrival to Transfiguration caused McGonagall to roll her eyes. She no longer harangued the young man for his lack of respect, as it didn't seem to make a dent in his attitude.

Once seated at his desk, he put his head down on his arms and closed his eyes. This year was turning out to be the most restful he'd ever had at Hogwarts.

As the class settled down, McGonagall looked around, then frowned. "Has anyone seen Mister Weasley or Miss Granger?"

When no one answered, her gaze turned to Harry Potter, and her eyes narrowed. "Mister Potter?"

"Here," Harry mumbled drowsily, causing the class to titter in amusement.

"Where are Mister Weasley and Miss Granger?" she asked sharply.

"I've no idea," he answered honestly. Raising his head, he looked around. Spotting their empty desks, he raised an eyebrow. "But I can tell you exactly where they're not." He pointed to their chairs.

"Yes, Mister Potter, I can see that for myself!" McGonagall snapped.

"Then I'm afraid I can be of no help to you, Professor. They were at breakfast, so I know they didn't sleep through." He shrugged. "We're students. Don't expect us to a Professor's job again. Go round up your own class."

"Do a Professor's job? What are you talking about?"

"Do you really want to go into how this class passed it's Defense OWLs last year?" His biting tone was somewhat marred by the yawn that followed. "You Professors are a lazy lot. You don't teach your classes, you make the students do that. And now you want us to round up your wayward charges? We should be drawing salary, at this rate!"

Putting his head down again, he closed his eyes and tried to go back to sleep.

"Detention, Mister Potter!" McGonagall all but growled.

"No, but thank you for the offer, Professor. I've given you enough attention for one day. Spending more time with you isn't in my plans."

The Professor stiffened and glared at the insolent youth. "You'll be scrubbing floors for a month, if I have any say in it!"

"Which you don't. Now, would you kindly lower your voice? You're interrupting my sleep with all your braying."

Her hand twitched toward her wand, then froze. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Class, I will return in a

moment. For now, open your books to chapter four and begin reading."

Turning, she marched to her office and just managed to not slam the door. Heading for the fireplace, she tossed in a bit of powder and snapped, "Headmaster's office!"

Class was almost over when the door opened and the Headmaster, looking angry and a bit disheveled, entered, towing Hermione and Ron behind him.

"Your students, Professor," he said quietly as he deposited them near their desks. "I'd like to see you at lunch," he continued, still addressing McGonagall.

At her nod, he looked at Ron and Hermione one last time, his eyes clearly showing his disappointment, then turned and walked from the room.

McGonagall glared at them. "It is your responsibility to get today's assignment from your peers, as I will not repeat myself for those unable to come to class on time! Today's little adventure has earned you both detention."

Ron and Hermione glanced at each other, then turned back to their Professor. "No, thanks," they both quipped.

"It was not a suggestion!" McGonagall screeched.

The penetrating sound of the Professor's displeasure startled Harry awake.

Looking around, he noticed the new arrivals and shook his head. "Delinquents," he taunted.

Ron stood and bowed to Harry. "We merely emulate the master."

The class laughed and McGonagall began to sputter. She was still sputtering when the trio lead the other students out of the room a few minutes later.

After dinner that evening, Dumbledore entered his office and sealed the door. All but falling into the chair behind his desk, he removed

his glasses and rubbed his temples. He could handle Harry, but adding more to the mix was beginning to tax both his patience and his energy.

After each class, Harry, Hermione and Ron had split up and disappeared. After the second time, Dumbledore placed tracking charms on each of them, but somehow the children had removed them. Asking them how they'd done so had resulted in blank looks. In frustration, the Headmaster had finally sealed the main doors in an attempt to keep the hunt for them to a manageable level.

It hadn't. He'd been at Hogwarts, in one capacity or another, for a number of years, and he was still surprised to find the number of rooms, closets and alcoves he'd never visited before. The trio, however, seemed to have no problem finding the most obscure places to hide from him.

"I think it was easier when they went outside," he murmured quietly. "I never knew hide and seek could be so exhausting." Yawning, he stood up and made his way to his private quarters, too tired to think of a solution to his wayward student problem.

Six days later, every student, except the Slytherins, had refused to go to class.

The staff had been appalled.

The Prefects had been threatened with the removal of their privileges. As a result, they had resigned. His threat to the student body about canceling the Quidditch season had been met by indifference. When he told them that there would be no Hogsmeade weekends, they ignored him.

Dumbledore was at a loss as to how to fix the problem.

October 9th, Headmaster's Office...

Albus stared out his office window, trying to ignore the pacing, ranting man in front of him, as he was beginning to repeat himself.

"... listening to me, Dumbledore? This could be a disaster! Hogwarts is known as a first class school, but because you can't control your

students, the school's reputation will suffer. You better hope the press doesn't find out about this, or by Merlin I'll..."

Raising an eyebrow, Dumbledore glared at the man. "You do what, Cornelius?"

"I'll remove you as Headmaster of this school!" The Minister for Magic bellowed.

"Really? Without the Board of Governors approval? Tsk. Bad form, Cornelius, stepping on their toes that way. However, it would raise interesting questions, would it not?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You are aware of the slight problems we're currently experiencing with most of the student body, as is the Board. If the press find out and you or the Board remove me after the story has been printed, I would, of course, be duty bound to tell the public that the Minister and the Board were both aware of the problems, but had chosen to do nothing, until the press caught wind of it."

Slight problems was an understatement and both men knew it. The fact that every student from Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Gryffindor houses had followed in the footsteps of the trio, who were quickly becoming the bane of Dumbledore's existence, was much more than a 'slight' problem.

Dumbledore's smile did not reach his eyes. "I imagine the public would call you and the Board to account for that, don't you? After all, you're not that popular lately, Cornelius."

Informing the Board and Fudge about the problems at Hogwarts had not been something he'd wanted to do, but he'd had no choice. Looking back now, Dumbledore realized that it had actually been one of his better moves.

As neither the Board nor the Minister had removed him from his position and had, in fact, helped him to cover up the problems Hogwarts was experiencing, they were now party to it. They had little choice but to let Dumbledore try to solve the issue as quietly as possible.

As the man began to stutter, Albus stood up and leaned over the desk, his eyes beginning to twinkle. "However, I think I may have an idea that will satisfy us both."

Fudge's lips compressed tightly, before he finally spat, "What idea?"

"A magically binding contract between the two of us. No one else will know."

"Explain, Dumbledore. I'm getting tired of your prattle!"

"It goes something like this. I will take a thirty day leave of absence. While I'm gone, you will appoint whomever you want to replace me. If, at the end of one month, you've found someone who can do a better job of controlling the students than I have, I will publicly step down as Headmaster of Hogwarts – health reasons or some such – and your choice as Headmaster can remain, if that is your wish.

"If things have not improved at the end of the month, however, you will agree to never interfere in Hogwarts matters again.

"As this will be a binding contract, if either of us breaks our oath, we will forfeit our magic."

Fudge's eyes gleamed. Finally, a chance to get rid of the meddling old coot! "A wonderful idea, Dumbledore. What sort of timetable are we looking at?"

Albus nearly laughed out loud as he saw the calculating look appear in Cornelius' eyes. "We will take the oath tonight. I will take my leave the day after tomorrow. This will give you time to chose your replacement, and me to make an announcement to both the staff and the students."

Nodding, Fudge sat down in front of Dumbledore's desk. "Then I believe we have a contract to work up."

Later that evening, as Dumbledore lay in bed, he couldn't help but chuckle. Stepping down as Headmaster was never going to happen. After all, Cornelius was as transparent as glass. Umbridge would be made Headmistress in his absence, of that he had no doubt. And while the students may suffer a bit under her management, it wouldn't last long. The students had a special loathing for the

toadish woman. And if nothing else, Potter would quickly take care of her.

Dolores' use of the blood quill last year might just turn into a boon, after all.

And once he was back, Potter would see that he, Dumbledore, was really a much better choice.

October 12th, Breakfast, Great Hall...

Hermione gazed around the Great Hall from her seat at the Gryffindor table and shook her head. "Well, the school's still standing and no one's been tortured. I must say, I'm surprised. I figured Umbridge would have at least written up a few dozen Educational Decrees by now."

Ron looked up at the Head table, his eyes narrowed in thought. "She's been too busy croaking and catching flies. That seems to have ended, however."

Hermione and Harry both followed Ron's gaze and realized he was right.

"I'd still like to know who cast that spell on her and why Madam Pomfrey couldn't remove it," Hermione murmured.

Harry's eyes narrowed slightly. If his suspicions were true, he'd need to have a talk with a certain House Elf. Or maybe a pair of House Elves.

Umbridge stood up at the Head table and called for attention.

"As you are all aware, I am now Headmistress of this school," she said in a breathy voice. "As such, there will be no more rule breaking. Any such activity will be severely punished. You will all go to class. You will all do your assignments. There will be no more disrespecting the staff.

"After breakfast, you will all go quietly to your classes, except Harry Potter. Mister Potter, you will go directly to my office and wait until I arrive. Is that understood?" She smiled at the young man, expecting compliance.

"Keep dreaming, Toady," Harry said as he stood up. "Alone? With you? Have a Dementor stashed in your office, do you? Or maybe another blood quill?" He laughed and headed for the door. "The day I spend time alone with you is the day the moon falls to Earth."

Umbridge's smile turned into a snarl as she quickly drew her wand. The insolent boy would learn, even if it required pain to teach him!

As one, the Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and Gryffindor students stood up and drew their wands on their new Headmistress.

"Looks like the Ministry will have to find a new replacement," Hermione called out. "This one didn't last long."

No one laughed and not a single student looked away from Umbridge until she slowly put her wand away.

October 14th, Gryffindor Common Room...

Harry smiled at Dobby as the elf placed breakfast on the table in front of him. He'd begun taking his meals in the Common Room after his exit from the Great Hall two mornings ago. It was easier to avoid Dolores that way. She didn't take defeat well and had tried on more than one occasion to stun him. Thanks to his training, reflexes and three quarters of the Hogwarts student population, she hadn't succeeded, though she did sport a nice variety of bruises from the attempts.

The student's were a rather grumpy lot when it came to Umbridge.

Two nights ago, the Headmistress had tried to enter the Gryffindor Common Room, only to discover that the students were also creative and had trapped the door. By the time someone had thought to inform McGonagall, Dolores had found herself with a rather amazing pair of buck teeth. The broccoli sprouting from her ears had been rather gross, but Harry had been amused to see the huge boils covering the woman's face. She's also been trussed up like a turkey and unable to move, though why no one thought to silence the screeching harridan had been beyond him.

McGonagall had managed to fix the damage and release the Headmistress. It was then that the true hilarity had ensued.

Someone had managed to reverse Umbridge's knees. Watching her attempt to walk had been a bright spot in his evening. The Hogwarts gossip said that Madam Pomfrey had been unable to fix her knees and that it had taken a trip to St. Mungo's to patch her up.

Strangely, McGonagall seemed reluctant to enter the lion's den after that.

Thanking Dobby and watching the elf disappear, he began to eat.

The Common Room door opened a few minutes later and Ron and Hermione entered, both grinning. When they joined him at the table, he asked them what the grins were for.

"Oh, lots of things," Ron said, stretching his legs out under the table and leaning back on his chair. "It's a lovely day. Snape's still stuttering the letter p, though he's taken to spitting a lot more while he's at it, so we've all learned to duck a lot. The other Professors are so angry with the student body that they've begun to hold Slytherin house up as an example of what we should be doing, and Umbridge..." He paused a moment and closed his eyes, savoring the news. "Umbridge hasn't been seen all morning. The patients seem to be in charge of the asylum. Oh, yes, it's a lovely day!"

"I saw McGonagall standing in front of the Gryffindor hourglass last night. I think she was actually weeping," Hermione added, shaking her head in amusement.

"Hmm, yes. Slytherin will be winning the House Cup this year," Harry said.

"Think there will be anyone left to care?" Hermione asked.

The three looked at each other and began to laugh.

When the Common Room door opened again, the trio smiled at Colin Creevey, who waved and ran up the stairs to the dorms.

Pushing his empty plate away a few minutes later, Harry asked Hermione how the study groups were doing. She'd been right about one thing. As important as it was for Harry to make a stand, he didn't want the other students to suffer, especially the fifth and seventh years.

"Amazingly well, actually. We set up a study schedule and it seems to be working out. I thought we'd have some slackers, but everyone's more than willing to do the work. What I'd like to know is how you managed to get copies of the Professors course guides and test keys."

"Dobby, of course. After all, he knows this school better than any of us," Harry told her.

"Brilliant," Ron murmured. "And he has cause enough to dislike Dumbledore."

"Yes, he does. Remind me to speak to both him and Kreacher. I think they've been going above and beyond my instructions to them when we left the summer house."

"Why not just call them both now and speak to them?" Hermione asked, a bit confused that such an obvious solution hadn't occurred to him.

"What? And ruin their fun?" He shrugged when she glared at him. "Let them play, Hermione. They're not harming anyone. Or, at least, not anyone important."

Before Hermione could argue the point, someone called Harry's name.

Turning, they saw Colin rushing down the stairs, a few third years in tow.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked.

"I can't find Dennis. He wasn't at breakfast, and his dorm mates," he said, waving to the students behind him, "said that he didn't come to bed last night. They assumed he slept down here."

"We didn't really think anything of it," Jimmy Peaks, one of Dennis' friends, said as he stepped out from behind Colin. "A lot of us have fallen asleep in the Common Room the last few days, what with McGonagall not checking on us like she used to."

No one had the heart to tell him that his Head of House was afraid of her lions.

"When was the last time anyone saw him?" Ron asked, sitting up straight in his chair.

"I saw him in the Ravenclaw Common Room last night. It was their turn to host classes," Colin replied. "But I left before he did."

"So did we," Jimmy said nervously. "But he knows better than to come back here alone."

Harry looked at Hermione. "Did you see him there last night?"

"Yes, but I don't remember him leaving. Ginny, Ron and I stayed behind to help straightened up a bit."

Shoving away from the table, Harry stood up. "Dammit! I'll be right back." Turning, he jogged up the stairs to his dorm room, Ron on his heels.

"Don't worry, Colin," Hermione said as she stood up. "We'll find him."

"This isn't like him, Hermione," Colin said quietly as he looked at her. "He knows better than to travel alone this year, not with Umbridge back. We always check in with each other at breakfast."

A door slammed closed upstairs and Harry and Ron came pelting back down to the common room.

"Colin, Jimmy, go to the Great Hall. Get Neville, Ginny and Seamus, then go directly to the hospital wing and wait there."

"What's going on," Colin nearly shouted. "Where's my brother?"

"Move, Colin! I don't have time to explain now. The rest of you lot, stay here," Harry ordered. "Ron, Hermione, let's go!"

The five bolted from the Common Room and split once they reached the first floor.

"So, Harry, where are we going?" Hermione asked as she ran beside his best friend.

"Dungeons. The Marauders Map shows Dennis in the room down there, with Umbridge and Filch."

"Shit! Filch is always moaning about bringing back the good old days when he could torture students," Ron exclaimed.

They didn't speak again until they reached the dungeons. Harry pulled out the map and muttered the words to activate it.

"There should be a door down this hall and to the left," he said quietly. Looking down, he pointed to the footprints in the dust on the floor.

They walked quickly down the hall, ducking the occasional cobweb, and heard the murmur of voices. As they drew closer, the voices became clearer.

"Do be a good boy, Dennis. I'm not asking for much," came Umbridge's hated voice. "Simply do as I ask and this will all be over with. After all, Potter doesn't care about you. He hasn't even noticed you've gone missing."

"I think he's unconscious again," Filch rasped.

"This is getting us nowhere. The boy is much more cooperative when pain is involved. We'll use the whip again, I think, Argus."

"Of course, Headmistress."

The pleasure in Filch's voice nearly caused Harry to vomit. The whip? Again?

Stuffing the map into his pocket, Harry drew his wand with the intention of blowing the door in. However, his anger caused him to use a bit more power than he'd intended and the door was turned to dust. The blast knocked Filch and Umbridge off their feet.

As the three students entered the room, Harry and Ron ducked to the right, while Hermione went left, all three crouching down.

Seeing their targets on the ground, Hermione quickly summoned Umbridge's wand and the whip in Filch's hand, while Ron immobilized them.

Seeing no others targets in the room, Harry rushed to Dennis, who was hanging from the ceiling by his wrists. The boy wore only his underwear and was covered in bloody whip marks. Both of his eyes were black and his bottom lip was split open.

"Oh, God," Hermione gasped as she reached Dennis.

"Bloody bastards," Ron growled as he marched toward Filch and Umbridge. Both were dazed and stared up at him uncomprehendingly.

"Wait, Ron," Harry said quietly. "Dennis comes first." With a flick of his wand, he levitated Dennis while Hermione released the manacles around his wrists.

He asked Hermione to take over the levitation spell, then told her and Ron to get Dennis to the infirmary.

"No," Ron said, gritting his teeth and glaring down at Filch and Umbridge. "You're in the middle of Slytherin territory and I'm not leaving you alone in this snake pit. Finish this so we can get Dennis the help he needs."

"Finish what?" Hermione asked.

Harry looked at her for a moment, then turned his eyes to the two people on the floor. "Remember what we were taught, Hermione," he said quietly.

She followed his gaze and her eyes narrowed. "Kill when you can," she murmured. When both boys glanced at her, she rolled her eyes. "Just do it and hurry up. And for God sake, no more summoning organs or molesting trains!"

Nodding, Harry crouched down in front of Umbridge and began to slap her, hard, until her eyes focused on him.

"Potter," she snarled and began to struggle in her bonds.

"Silence!" Harry commanded and watched as she flinched away from him.

Turning to Filch, he repeated the process until the man was coherent.

"I've been curious for some time, and now that I have the chance," Ron said as he leaned down to Umbridge, "I just have to know." Grabbing the sleeve of her fluffy sweater, he ripped it off her arm.

"I knew I should have taken the bet the twins offered," he breathed as he started at the Dark Mark on her arm. "I'd have made a few galleons."

"You know, Argus," Harry said conversationally as he levitated the man and walked him toward the back of the room, "you're lucky she didn't kill you. Death Eaters aren't known for being kind to squibs."

"What do you think you're doing, Potter?" Filch growled.

"Why, giving you what you seem to love so much," Harry replied as he stuck the man to the wall and fastened the manacles around his wrists and feet. Releasing the levitation charm and the ropes that bound him, he watched Filch grab the chains connected to the manacles, trying to take some of the weight off his shoulders. "You're always pining for the good old days, when these dungeons were put to use."

Turning away, he levitated Umbridge, placed her next to Filch and repeated the process of securing her to the wall.

"They make a happy looking couple, don't they?" Ron asked.

"Just lovely," Hermione said. "Harry, you need to hurry. We have to get Dennis to Madam Pomfrey."

Harry called for Dobby. When the elf appeared, he bent down and spoke quietly to him for a few moments.

Nodding, Dobby moved to the manacles hanging from the ceiling. He tried to stretch up high enough to reach them, then huffed in frustration. Harry came to his aid and lifted him up high enough.

Cupping the manacles, his hand glowed blue for a moment. "Down, please," he told Harry. Once his feet were back on the floor, he turned to Filch and Umbridge and raised his hands. Both humans were engulfed in a sickly yellow aura that slowly faded away as the elf lowered his hands.

"Harry Potter needs to step back," Dobby said.

Taking several steps back, Harry smiled at his victims. "You wanted Hogwarts so much, I give her to you, Dolores. You and Filch will now become part of this school forever."

Filch began to bellow in outrage and struggle in his bonds.

Umbridge shook her head violently and began to scream.

Dobby raised his hands and smiled. "Goodbye, Toad Lady!" he chirped. Turning his palms inward, he slammed his hands together and the room began to rumble. A blinding flash of light came from his hands and those in the room had to turn away from the glare.

When she looked back, Dobby had his hand raised once more. With a wave, two sets of manacles appeared on the wall.

"Wait. Where did they go?" Hermione asked.

Dobby took two steps forward and patted the wall gently. "They're in here, Miss Hermione. They are now part of Hogwarts."

Harry spun around and moved toward the door. "Dobby, you have your orders. Ron, Hermione, let's get Dennis to Madam Pomfrey."

"Yes, Harry Potter," the elf said as he picked up the whip from the floor and rushed to follow the four people from the room. When he reached the door, he waited until the humans had disappeared before turning back to inspect the room.

It was a little smaller now, but only he recognized that fact after having been in the room for the first time a few minutes ago. Hogwarts House Elves were only allowed in the Slytherin Common Room and Snape's quarters. All other portions of the dungeon were off limits.

Repairing the door, he closed it and rushed down the hallway. Sensing no one about, he stepped out from the hallway, turned and erased the footprints from the dusty floor and replaced the cobwebs in the hall. With a last look, he nodded to himself and disappeared.

He appeared a moment later in Filch's office and set to work.

Dragging a chair to the wall, Dobby climbed up on it and once again cupped his hands around the pair of manacles that hung there. This time, his palm glowed red.

Climbing down, he put the chair back, then moved the desk into a corner. Flicking his hands, small blood splatters appeared on the wall and floor. Finally, he placed the whip on the desk and stepped back.

Lifting one hand and concentrating carefully, he reached out and placed several magical auras in the room, then turned and faced the door. Pulling his hand back toward his chest, he made a fist. Then, snapping his arm out, he opened his palm and muttered "Go." A veritable rainbow of light streaked toward the door and disappeared.

Dropping his hand, he closed his eyes and reached out with his senses. "Fear, pain, hatred. Shock, horror. Angry Man, Toad Lady and the boy. Harry Potter, Miss Hermione, Ron Weasley. Good, good," he murmured.

Opening his eyes, he looked around one more time, then waved his hand. The room was engulfed in bright white light. When it faded, the elf was gone.

Hogwarts Infirmary...

Ginny stood by the doors, not really sure what was going on, but she held her wand in her hand, hidden behind her leg. Neville, Seamus and Jimmy stood guard outside the doors, though she wasn't sure why. Colin paced the infirmary nervously as Madam Pomfrey glared at them both.

When she heard Neville shout, she moved into the shadows away from the door and waited tensely.

A moment later, the doors flew open with a bang. Harry, Hermione and Ron entered, Dennis Creevey bobbing gently behind them. They moved toward the bed, blocking Madam Pomfrey's view.

"What on earth is going on," Pomfrey snapped. "I don't know what's going on here but -"

"Dennis!" Colin gasped as he rushed forward. "What happened to him?"

Poppy gasped when she saw Dennis. Hermione had put him on the nearest bed and moved out of the way as the mediwitch and Colin rushed to his side.

Drawing her wand, Poppy began casting spells, while Colin grabbed his brother's hand and wept.

Summoning what she needed, she injected several potions into the unconscious boy on the bed. She asked Hermione to take Colin to the other side of the room, and told Ron to inform Professor McGonagall.

All but dragging the protesting boy away from his brother, Hermione tried to calm him as Poppy pulled the curtain around the bed and turned back to her patient. His shoulders had been dislocated and his clavicles were broken.

Harry stopped Ron before he left the infirmary. "Remember what we discussed on the way here."

Nodding, the redhead left the infirmary at a jog.

Motioning to Ginny, Harry walked out the doors to join Neville, Seamus and Jimmy.

"What's going on, Harry? What the hell happened to Dennis?" Neville asked quietly.

"Umbridge and Filch," Harry spat. "I'll explain the rest once McGonagall gets here, Neville. I asked Colin and Jimmy to bring the three of you here for two reasons. One, I wasn't sure what the hell we were running into and, more importantly, what might follow us back. Second, once the situation has been explained to McGonagall,

I want you, Ginny and Seamus to find the Prefects and inform them of what's happened. No one is to walk the halls of Hogwarts alone. The younger students, especially."

Seeing the questions in their eyes, Harry held up a hand. "I know it's confusing, but you'll understand soon enough."

"What is the meaning of this?"

Turning, Harry watched Professor McGonagall and Ron rushing toward him.

"Mister Weasley said something about Dennis Creevey being injured. Why are you all hanging around here?"

"They're the only ones who can tell us what happened," Madam Pomfrey said from the doorway. "Come in, Professor. Dennis isn't in any danger, but his injuries are severe."

McGonagall entered the infirmary and Madam Pomfrey lead her behind the curtain surrounding Dennis' bed.

Harry and the others joined Hermione and Colin.

When Colin looked at him pleadingly, Harry placed a hand on his shoulder "He'll be all right, Colin. Madam Pomfrey's the best. I should know. I've been under her care enough times."

After several minutes, McGonagall and Poppy stepped out from behind the curtain and walked toward the students.

"Madam Pomfrey informs me that Dennis has been hung by his wrists, beaten and whipped," the Professor said angrily. "What happened?"

"Exactly that," Harry growled. "Colin couldn't find Dennis this morning and after talking to his brother's dorm mates, he asked Ron, Hermione and I to help him look for him. Before we left the Common Room, I asked Colin and Jimmy to find Neville, Seamus and Ginny, explain that Dennis was missing and to go to infirmary and wait to see if he showed up there."

"Why the infirmary?" McGonagall asked.

"Honestly, Minerva, this is Dennis we're talking about. The boy who, in his first year, fell out of the boat on his way to the castle? The same boy who, in his second year, nearly broke his neck falling down two flights of stairs because he was in a hurry? Or this year, when he nearly burned himself to a crisp in Potions class?"

"I get the point, Poppy. It was a logical assumption. Now, continue, Mister Potter."

"We looked in all the usual places Dennis was known to go. When we couldn't find him, we went to Mister Filch's office, figuring he'd help us look."

"Why Filch?" Minerva asked.

"That man knows this castle better than anyone, save a house elf," Ron told her.

Nodding, she looked back at Harry. "Continue."

"When we reached Filch's office, we could hear him and Umbridge talking about using a whip." He ran a shaking hand through his hair and looked at his Head of House. "I'm sorry Professor, but I was scared and not thinking straight. I... Well, I kicked the door in. Umbridge and Filch were standing off to the side of the office and Filch had a whip in his hand. Dennis..." He paused and looked at Colin.

Hermione reached out and placed a hand on Colin's shoulder. "Dennis was hanging from the wall. He'd been stripped and looked as though he'd been whipped and beaten," she said raggedly. "He was unconscious."

"Umbridge drew her wand," Harry continued, "and Hermione managed to summon it before she could cast anything on us. Filch dropped the whip and told us that the Headmistress had ordered Dennis to be punished. Hermione cast a levitation charm on Dennis, but couldn't remove the manacles while holding the charm. Ron and I went to help her and that's when they bolted."

"Bolted?" McGonagall asked.

"Ran away," Ron said. "Umbridge and Filch ran from the office. I turned around and tried to cast a jelly-legs jinx, but they'd already rounded the corner." He blinked several times, then his eyes widened. "Oh, Merlin, I tried to cast a spell at a Professor!" He stared at McGonagall, horrified by what he'd done.

Minerva reached out and patted his arm. "Be easy, Mister Weasley. If what you said is true, then you've broken no rules that I know of. In fact, you and your friends may very well have saved a life."

"Has Mister Creevey's injuries been documented?" McGonagall asked as she turned to Poppy.

"Of course."

"Then I will place a call to the aurors," she said, turning away.

"What?" Harry yelped. "The aurors?"

"A crime has been committed, Mister Potter," Minerva said, surprised by the young man's reaction. "They must be informed of what Umbridge and Filch have done."

"But the Ministry backed her," Harry said, staring at his Head of House. "She sent Dementors after me. She tried to get me kicked out of school. They hauled me up before the Wizengamot for defending myself and nearly had me expelled and my wand snapped! For Merlin's sake, she used a blood quill on me and they let her, you all did. Hermione summoned her wand and Ron tried to cast a spell at her. The aurors, they'll..."

"Calmly, Mister Potter," Poppy said as she moved to his side. She looked at Minerva. "I think it best if he stayed here, Minerva. In fact, I'm keeping Ron and Hermione, too. This has been distressing for all of them and I'm placing them under medical care."

"I don't think that's wise," McGonagall began.

"My decision, Minerva. Make your call and leave the medical decisions to me, if you please."

"Very well, Poppy, but I'm sure the aurors will wish to speak with you, at least." Turning to face the other students, she made a shooing

motion toward the door. "Everyone out! Colin, you may stay until Poppy tells you to leave. The rest of you, out!"

Grumbling, Neville, Seamus, Ginny and Jimmy all left the infirmary, McGonagall following behind them.

Once the door closed, Poppy told Colin to sit by his brother's side, then lead Harry, Hermione and Ron to back of the infirmary and told them to get into bed.

Ron shot Harry a dirty look.

Hermione simply sighed and followed the healers orders.

Poppy disappeared into her office for a few minutes. When she returned, she carried three bottles in her hands. Starting with Hermione, she sat down and placed a bottle on the table. She spoke with the young woman for several minutes, then stood and moved to Ron's bed.

When she finally arrived at Harry's bedside, she looked at him, sighed and sat down. "You and I have spent more time together than I like to think about, young man. As such, I think I'm well versed in the many moods of Harry Potter. I don't know what's going on here, but I know a snow job when I hear it."

When Harry began to protest, she held up one hand. "Stop. Save your excuses for the gullible, please, and credit me with some intelligence. I'll give you credit for an excellent performance, but your concern about the aurors was a lie. You don't want them to interview you, and I have my suspicions as to why that is. However, I'm not asking for details.

"You saved Dennis Creevey from that horrible woman." She reached out and ran a hand through his hair. "Not enough people have looked after you, have they?"

"You always have," Harry said quietly. "And I'm not sure I've ever really thanked you for that."

"The one thing you've always been, Potter, is polite. Of course you've thanked me," she said gruffly. When he smiled, she patted his shoulder, then pointed to the bottle she'd placed on the

nightstand. "That's a calming draught. Drink it, or pour it into the potted plant near the bathroom. Either way, I can honestly tell the aurors that you and your friends have been given the potion."

"Thank you, Madam Pomfrey."

Standing, she reached down and drew the blanket over him, then patted his shoulder once more. Turning away, she walked to her office to finish her paperwork and prepare for the aurors arrival. Shaking her head, she could only think that the Headmaster had made a serious mistake in pitting himself against Potter. She just hoped she didn't end up in the cross-hairs. While it was true she'd always treated Harry when he was injured, she, too, had never attempted to prevent those injuries.

Office of the Deputy Headmistress, afternoon...

Minerva held her head in her hands as Shacklebolt gave his report to Madam Bones and Minister Fudge.

"It's just as the students explained it to Professor McGonagall, Ma'am," Shacklebolt told Amelia Bones. "There are traces of Dennis Creevey's blood on the manacles, the wall and the whip. Dollingworth, the Unspeakable, was able to pick up the emotional spoor in the room and it's as one would expect. Fear, pain, shock. But I'm sure he'll give you his own report. The auras in the room are those of Dolores Umbridge, Argus Filch, Dennis Creevey, Hermione Granger, Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley. The other auras in the room had decayed too much to be identified, which makes them more than twelve hours old."

"Did you follow the auras?" Bones asked.

"Yes, Ma'am. Umbridge and Filch ran from the room, just as the students said. They went out through the main doors. All trace of their auras was lost at the edge of Hogwarts wards. Potter, Granger, Weasley and Creevey's auras were traced to the doors of the infirmary."

"Have you taken Madam Pomfrey's report and gathered her documentation of Creevey's injuries?"

Shacklebolt held up the folder in his hand. "It's all here, Ma'am. She is asking that we not involve the children in the investigation, if at all possible. They're all currently under medical care for shock. She says that the trauma they've been through would be exacerbated by making them submit to memory retrieval and strongly advises that we avoid such action if at all possible."

"Are you sure those students are telling the truth? Potter has no reason to like Dolores and has made preposterous claims in the past," Fudge said, nervously twisting his bowler hat between his fingers.

"Between the evidence the aurors have gathered and Döllingworth's report? Most definitely," Bones assured him.

"I just cannot believe that she would do such a thing," Fudge protested.

Standing, Bones looked down at him and shook her head. "With all do respect, Minister, you would do well to distance yourself from this case."

"What do you mean?" Fudge asked, alarmed.

"You made her Headmistress in Dumbledore's absence," Minerva said, looking up at him.

"Exactly," Bones agreed. "She is now a wanted criminal. She had a student whipped and beaten, then ran when she was caught. If the press find out, and find out that you are trying to defend her..." Her voice trailed off and she cocked an eyebrow meaningfully.

Fudge blanched. "I understand." Standing, he faced Madam Bones and straightened his shoulders. "Do what you must to apprehend the criminals, Amelia. If there is anything you need from me, please let me know."

Turning to Minerva, he smiled. "I'll be sending you a new Headmaster soon, Professor. I have someone in mind already and I can assure you, he will do a much better job than Madam Umbridge!"

Minerva's mouth dropped open as the Minister spun on his heel and left her office.

"He's going to...After Umbridge, he thinks he's qualified..." She rose to her feet and slammed a hand down on her desk. "I don't believe this!"

Amelia shook her head. "I don't envy you, Minerva. You're being stuck with Fudge's cast offs. But from my perspective, it's rather an interesting thing to watch."

"What are you talking about?" McGonagall asked, tossing her hand in the air. "That man is directly responsible for Umbridge's presence at this school. If he hadn't sent her back her, Dennis Creevey wouldn't now be in the hospital wing!"

Amelia's eyes darkened with sadness. "I know. And I'm sorry for it."

"Then what is it you find so interesting?"

The Head of Magical Law Enforcement looked back toward the door Fudge had exited. "I've never seen a man actually destroy his own career before. Hell, at this point, he's hanging himself and doesn't even realize it."

Hogwarts, the morning of October 17th ...

A knock on the door caused the new Headmaster of Hogwarts to smile in pleasure. Finally, all his hard work had paid off.

"Come!" he called loudly.

The door opened and Ron Weasley stepped into the office, a covered crystal dish in his hand. "Hello, Headmaster. It's good to see you."

"Ron," Percy Weasley said, nodding. "What brings you to my office, and so early in the morning?"

Ron sighed. "I wanted to apologize to you. When I heard that you'd been appointed Headmaster - well, let's just say that Mum would have washed my mouth out and leave it at that. But Harry pointed

out that if anyone could do a better job than Dumbledore, it would be you. He said you'd be the one to fix what's wrong at Hogwarts."

Percy sat back on his chair, shocked. "Harry said that?"

"He did." He moved to the chair and sat down in front of Percy's desk. "I have to say, Perc, things have been really odd around here this year. Dumbledore's been trying to get Harry, Hermione and I do to some really strange things. And we're not the only ones he's asked. That's why none of us have been going to class! We just don't feel safe."

"Strange? How so?" Percy asked, intrigued.

"Well, you know that Hermione's a powerful witch and few doubt her intelligence. Dumbledore tried to talk both Harry and I into sleeping with her and not using the contraception charm. He kept saying something about not letting all the good blood get away." Ron shook his head. "Seamus, Neville, Dean, Anthony...a lot of blokes received the same orders from Dumbledore, though with different girls. Dean was even asked to..do that...with Ginny! We can't understand what's going on and frankly, the girls are scared."

"That's barbaric!" Percy exclaimed, outraged at the very thought of someone violating a young woman in such away, especially his baby sister!

"I know! But that's not all of it, Percy." He leaned forward. "Dumbledore has been trying to get Harry and I to learn how to cast the Unforgivable curses," he said quietly.

"What?"

Ron nodded. "We've held out as long as we can, but we're sure glad to see you here. You were right. Fudge is smarter than we all gave him credit for. After all, he sent you here to help us."

Percy expression was a cross between arrogance and outrage. "Don't worry, Ron. I'm not going to let anything happen to you, Ginny or your friends."

Ron's tense posture relaxed visibly. "Thank you, brother. I mean, Headmaster. Sorry!"

Percy shook his head. "It's all right to call me by my given name, or brother, when we're private like this, Ron. But please address me as Headmaster when others are with you."

Ron blinked. "Thanks, Percy."

Leaning back on his chair, he looked at the covered dish in Ron's hand. "What's that?"

"What?" Ron looked down. "Oh, this! When we heard that you were going to be made Headmaster, the fifth, six and seventh year Gryffindors all pitched in and bought you this! It took a bit of doing to get it here on time, and we weren't sure we'd have enough, but we managed," he said proudly as he placed the dish on the desk. "It's our way of welcoming you."

Percy examined the dish, recognizing its quality. "It's beautiful, Ron," he said, somewhat shocked that the students would go to such lengths.

"Open it," Ron urged him.

Puzzled, but curious, Percy did as he asked and smiled at what he found inside. "Salt water taffy," he said, looking up at Ron. "You remembered."

"I did. You do still like it, don't you?" he asked earnestly.

Laughing, Percy plucked a piece of taffy out of the dish. "I do. Please thank the students for me, would you?" When Ron nodded, he popped the taffy into his mouth and began to chew. That his brother remembered his favorite sweet touched him greatly.

The brothers spent some time together, reminiscing about their family. Percy had eaten three more pieces of taffy, and was beginning to act a bit strange.

Glancing at the clock on the mantel, Ron stood up and announced that he'd best stop taking up the Headmaster's time, as this was his first day and he was sure the students would be gathered in the Great Hall to welcome him at breakfast.

Percy giggled slightly, then stared at his desk oddly. "It's like a rainbow," he said, staring at the grain of the wood. "Do you see it?" he asked.

Ron frowned. "Are you all right?"

The new Headmaster of Hogwarts surged to his feet. "I'm fine. Never been better, in fact. I'm Headmaster at Hoggglewarts. No, that's not right. Hoggetward? No, no. Hogfeet! Yes, that's it. I'm Headmaster at Hogfeet's school wizardcraft and witchery." He laughed. "Witchery...mitchery...snitchery." He glared at Ron. "There will be no snitchery at Hogfeet's!"

"Um, right. No snitchery. Understood, Headmaster," Ron said as he backed toward the door. "Breakfast is in a few minutes and you need to address the students, sir."

Percy nodded, then quickly grabbed his head and stared at Ron. "Did you see that? My head nearly flew off! Need to be more careful. Hmm, breakfast, did you say? Yes, yes, must address the students." He waved at Ron cheerfully. "Go on then, go address the students."

"Not me, Perc. You have to address the students. You're the new Headmaster, remember?" Though he didn't want to show it, he was becoming a bit alarmed by Percy's behavior.

"Right. Knew that. Well, then? Go on down. I'll be there shortly, my good man," Percy exclaimed.

Leaving the office, Ron dashed down the stairs for the Great Hall. The taffy had been Hermione's idea and he had a few questions for the witch. She'd told him to play suck up to his brother to put Percy at ease, making him more likely to try the taffy. One didn't need to be a genius to make the connection.

Sliding into his spot at the Gryffindor table, he glared at Hermione, who sat across from him. "What did you put in that taffy?" he hissed.

"Something I found in one of the books Harry gave me. It's just a little something to loosen up our new Headmaster," she replied. "Did it work?"

"If he gets any looser, he's going to fly apart, Hermione!"

She laughed. "Then I'd say we're going to experience a rather interesting address this morning."

Harry looked between the two of them, and not for the first time, was glad to remain clueless.

Headmaster Percy Weasley arrived a few minutes later. He walked to the Head table with his head down, seeming to be extraordinarily interested in his feet. He approached the Headmaster's chair, then looked out at the shining faces of the student body.

"What are you all doing here?" he exclaimed, surprised by their presence.

"It's breakfast," Minerva hissed. "They're waiting for you to address them so they can eat."

He nodded, absently, still staring out at the students. "My feet make rainbows when I walk," he suddenly blurted. He cocked his head. "Well? Stop staring at me and eat, already. You can't be expected to learn if you don't eat a noxious breakfast every morning."

"I think the word is nutritious," Minerva said quietly.

"Yes, that too," Percy said with a nod. "So? Eat, already!" He punctuated his command by slamming his hand down on the table, causing the flatware to jump.

When the food appeared at the tables, Harry shook his head. "Hell, he's been taking lessons from Dumbledore."

"No, Hermione's got him pumped full of her wacky taffy," Ron accused.

"Same difference," Hermione said with a shrug.

Leaning slightly toward the table, Harry looked at Colin Creevey. "How's Dennis?"

"He's being released today," Colin said from his seat beside Hermione. "He should be joining us for lunch."

"Excellent," Ron cheered.

"Definitely a good day," Hermione agreed.

"Have his memories returned?" Harry asked.

Frowning, Colin shook his head. "No, but Madam Pomfrey said that's not unusual. She said something about the mind choosing not to process the trauma or some such. I didn't really understand it all. Mum and Dad understand what she means though and warned that just because he doesn't remember now, doesn't mean he'll never remember and that we should be prepared, just in case."

Hermione frowned. "What do we tell him if he asks us what happened?"

"Just that he was hurt and that Madam Pomfrey healed him. If he asks for details, send him to me," Colin said.

Harry watched the young man carefully. Something was missing and he couldn't quite put his finger on what it was.

"Is there anything else we should be aware of?" Ron asked. "Anything he needs?"

Colin sighed. "Well, he has nightmares, but I've already spoken to his dorm mates about that." He ran a hand over his face and shook his head. "Madam Pomfrey says they'll fade with time."

Harry closed his eyes as he figured out what was wrong. Colin, usually hyper-actively cheerful, had been forced to mature in the last few days.

If Dumbledore hadn't left, Umbridge would never had been put in charge. None of this would have happened, Harry thought. Yet another sin to lay at that bastard's feet.

"Hermione," Harry asked as he opened his eyes. "How much of that taffy do you have?"

"Depends on what you're wanting it for," she said. "Why?"

"Percy could do a lot of damage if he comes back to himself long enough."

"Now wait a minute," Ron protested. "My brother may be an ass, but I don't think I like the idea of him being drugged!"

"He'll be fine, Ron. The drug is mildly addictive -"

"What? Hermione, how could you," he growled.

"Let me finish, Ron!" She glared him into silence. "Yes, the drug is mildly addictive, which means he's going to want more. However, when the time comes for Percy to step down as Headmaster, we'll simply administer the antidote. He won't be harmed in any way."

"Antidote?" Harry asked.

"Of course! I'm not going to feed someone an addictive drug without having a way of countering it."

"I should have known that," Ron mumbled. "Sorry, Hermione."

"That being the case, we're going to have to keep feeding it to him," Harry told them.

Though Ron wasn't thrilled with the idea, he agreed.

Hermione shrugged. "There should be plenty of taffy to keep him out of our hair until Dumbledore gets back from his little jaunt."

"Hmm, yes," Harry murmured. "I wonder what the man is up to. I mean, leaving like he did? He had to know Umbridge would be put in charge in his absence. There's more going on here than we know."

"Well, that's new and different," Ron said, sarcastically. "Let's face it, we're usually clueless until something jumps out and bites us on the ass."

Harry shook his head. "I don't like it, but I don't see any way of finding out what's going on."

"Heads up, guys," Seamus called from a few seats away.

Looking up, Harry noticed the Potion's Professor stalking toward their House table.

"Great. Wonder what he wants?" Ron grumbled.

"I think we're about to find out," Hermione said.

"P-P-P-Potter!" Snape snarled as he glided to a stop next to Harry. "The other P-P-Professors may let you get away with your little rebellion, but if you think I'll let you go unchecked, think again. I want to know what you and your little friends think you're doing."

Ducking the man's spittle, Harry shrugged. "And people in Hell want ice water. Now, if that's all, I have a lovely day of Origami planned. My animal collection is nearly complete."

Snape leaned closer, his eyes narrowed in hate. "I know that you're the one who cast this blasted spell on me, P-P-Potter. The Headmaster may turn a blind eye to your actions, but I will not. I want it removed, now!"

Harry scowled. "I didn't cast anything on you, Professor, especially not something as childish and harmless as a stuttering curse. After what I did to you this summer, I assumed you'd be smart enough to recognize the difference between an immature prank and something more serious." He sighed in discontent. "And I had really hoped at least one auror would have spotted you when you went to replace your wand. I'm really very disappointed in that."

When the man snarled, Harry stood up so suddenly, Snape stumbled back a few steps.

"Look, I told you I didn't cast that stupid spell and I meant it. And while I'm certainly not going to subject myself to Veritaserum, I'm pretty sure I can find a cure for it."

Snape shook his head. "And what makes you think you can find a cure when I couldn't?"

"Easy. You don't have access to a library full of old, illegal and just plain out of print books."

"P-P-Potter," Snape began with a growl.

"Stuff it, Professor, or I won't waste my time and you can stutter your way through the rest of your miserable life, however long that may be," Harry snapped, glaring at the man. "Now get the hell out of my way."

Turning away, Harry left the Great Hall, muttering to himself.

With a final glare at Harry's friends, Snape spun on his heel and left.

Ron and Hermione looked at each other for a moment, then bolted from the hall in search of Harry.

They found him in the Common Room, quietly talking to Dobby.

Once the elf had disappeared, Harry looked at his friends inquiringly.

"You're going to help Snape?" Hermione blurted.

Harry shrugged. "Why not? I don't know about you two, but I'm getting tired of carrying a bit of that man around everywhere I go," he said, holding out his robes and cringing. "Even though I know my robes are laundered, my skin still crawls at the thought of him spitting on me every time he says my name."

Ron grimaced. "Yeah, I can see the upside, but why not simply end the spell?"

"Where's the fun in that?" Harry asked, smiling. "Besides, if I just ended it, he'd know I cast it. This way, if he performs a ritual I 'found' in a book, he'll think he solved his own problem, and we'll be able to enjoy watching him jump through the hoops I've created."

Ron shook his head. "He's going to be suspicious of any instructions you give him, you know."

"That's why I'm not going to give him anything. I'm having Dobby copy a bunch of stuff from different books in my library. He'll insert the ritual and deliver the 'old book' to the Professor once he's done."

"What's the ritual?" Hermione asked, curious.

Harry shrugged. "You'll see."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I hate it when you do that!"

At lunch, Dobby reported that the book had been delivered. Looking at the Head table, Harry noted Snape's absence and shook his head. It was just too easy.

That evening after dinner, Harry faced his Housemates in the Common Room and explained what he'd done.

"We all knew you put that curse on him," Seamus said. "Hell, even Snape knows it, he just can't prove it."

"True, but today I gave him a 'cure' for his curse," Harry said. "And we're all about to find out if he took the bait."

"How?" Parvati asked.

Turning, Harry flicked his wand at one wall and sat down on the couch between Ron and Hermione. "Well, if he fell for it, the modified monitoring charm that was placed on him will activate as soon as he leaves the castle." He made a mental note to thank Dobby, yet again.

The students talked quietly for several minutes before the wall flickered to life. They watched as the Professor walked down the steps from the castle and pause at the bottom. He looked around furtively, hitched a small bag up on his shoulder, then turned and walked briskly toward the forest.

"I've never heard of a spell like this," Hermione murmured. "We'll be able to watch him?"

"I asked Dobby for something that would allow us to see what he's doing," Harry said quietly. "I have to say, I'm becoming more and more impressed with House Elf magic."

"That makes two of us."

"So, what's he doing, Harry?" Ron asked.

"Erm...trying to break the curse?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "Yeah, figured that one out on my own. What I want to know is how."

Everyone turned to Harry, waiting for the explanation, while Harry watched the images on the wall with narrowed eyes. Snape had just entered the forest.

"The book said that touching a Unicorn would break the curse. It listed the creatures as a panacea."

Hermione snorted. "That's ridiculous! There's no such thing as a panacea."

"Snape would disagree," Dean said, grinning. "Or maybe it's just that he's desperate enough to try anything."

"So, what's in the bag he's carrying?" Neville asked.

"A Pickelhaube helm and a Field Marshal's baton," Harry replied. He shook his head, seeing many blank looks. "A really funky looking helmet and an ornate stick. The ritual is, once the Unicorn is found, Snape needs to strip naked, put on the helmet, hold the stick and touch the pretty horsey."

Much gagging and wretching followed the explanation.

"Wait a minute, Harry," Lavender said, some time later. "So Snape thinks that he simply has to touch a Unicorn and he'll be cured?"

When he nodded, she turned back to the screen, her eyes wide. "Oh, that's just not right! This falls under the subject of things you really don't want to know about your Professors!"

"What are you nattering on about?" Ginny asked.

"Don't you guys get it?" Lavender asked, looking first at Ginny, then at her other Housemates. "Snape's a virgin!"

"Get real, Lavender. Snape? A virgin?" Seamus scoffed.

"She has a point," Hermione told them, watching the Professor as he prowled the forest. "Snape knows as well as we do that a

Unicorn would never let a non-virgin near it. The fact that he's out there, apparently looking for one to molest, means he is a virgin."

Ron blanched. "As if talking about Snape's virginity weren't bad enough, you have to go and use the word molest?"

"Look!" Colin exclaimed. "He's found something!"

Eyes snapped back to the wall and the students watched Snape dance to one side, narrowly avoiding an arrow.

Harry grinned. "Looks like he found a horse...or half of one, anyway." His eyes narrowed as a Centaur stepped out and faced Snape. "I think the Professor is in for a bad night. That's Bane."

The fight lasted longer than most thought it would and the student's voices grew as they cheered or shouted advice to the combatants. Harry wasn't sure who they were cheering for, but his money was on Snape. Not because he thought the Centaur was a push-over, but because if Snape lost, the game would be over.

Bane was quick with his bow, leaving Snape little choice but to dodge or swat arrows away with spells. Had another member of Bane's herd been with him, the Professor would have been in worse shape. As it was, he took an arrow to the leg before he managed to bring Bane down with a stunner.

As Snape began to limp back toward the castle, Ron glanced at Harry, then Hermione, and groaned. "I know that look, Hermione, and I'm almost afraid to ask what's going through that fuzzy little head of yours."

"My head is not fuzzy," she snapped.

Harry snorted and opened his mouth to refute that, only to have Ron slap his hand over his mouth.

"Yeah, I know what you're going to say, mate, but shut it. You get her started on the topic of her hair, and we'll never hear the end of it," he muttered. Removing his hand, he shook his head. "Well, what is going through that brilliant mind of yours?" he asked her.

"Oh, I was just wondering what Rita Skeeter's up to these days," she said, her eyes bright.

Authors Notes:

So, once more with feeling!

Warning! Run on sentence inbound. Skip if they drive you batty.

~Takes a deep breath~

This isn't canon, there are no horcruxes, there are no Deathly Hallows, there is no ship, what you thought you knew from the first five books may not be included in this story or may have been significantly changed to suit my needs/wants/desires and if that bothers you stop reading and make us both happy.

~Pants slightly~ Hope you enjoyed the chapter and thanks for reading!

~ Bob's Note.

One word... it's the meaning of life.

Donuts!

Disclaimer:

Bob quietly opened the office door and looked in. Seeing his wife busy typing at the computer, he pushed the door open and moved behind her, making no noise.

"Don't" Alyx growled. "I'm busy!"

"Damn it! How did you know I was here?" he asked, nearly stomping his foot in aggravation.

She sighed. "I told you last chapter. I write the disclaimers, dear. I know what you're going to do before you do it because I control your actions here."

"You do not," he protested.

Turning in her chair to face him, she raised an eyebrow, then wiggled her nose at him.

Bob turned away and strutted toward the door, struck a pose, hands on his hips. Spinnning on his heel, he sashayed to his chair, stopped and struck another pose, staring at Alyx with a sexy pout on his lips.

She smiled, then snapped her fingers.

Bob sunk into his chair looking at his wife, a bit horrified. "What was that?"

"You imitation of a runway model," she told him. "Not bad, honey. You may have a future in high fashion!"

He wrinkled his nose. "They wouldn't let me eat donuts," he muttered.

"True, but that hip movement you had going on was very intriguing," she said, grinning.

He perked up. "Yeah? Would you like to see more of it?"

"Get the story started, dear, then we can discuss it in private."

Jumping to his feet, he looked at the readers. "We don't own Harry Potter," he said firmly. Then, grabbing his wife's hand, he dragged her toward the door.

Alyx looked over her shoulder and smiled. "Enjoy the story folks!"

Evening, October 20th, Hogwarts Staff Room...

McGonagall sat, quietly steaming. Percy, the new Headmaster, was fifteen minutes late for the weekly staff meeting. To say that Percy had been a disappointment in the position would be a gross understatement, but her hands were tied. The Ministry had somehow managed to convince Albus to go on thirty days leave while they tried to restore order in the school.

Minerva shook her head angrily and was about to stand when Percy opened the door and walked in, carrying a large plate of brownies.

"I apologize for being tardy," he said, then giggled as he placed the brownies on the table. "I got caught up answering a question from a student concerning the new rules."

Sprout's eyes lit up, seeing the platter of sweets. When Percy smiled and pushed the platter in her direction, she eagerly took one and passed the platter to Snape. Slowly, it made it's way around the table, each teacher helping themselves to a brownie.

In the Gryffindor common room, Harry, Ron and Hermione had just sat down on the couch for a bit of light entertainment.

Harry flicked his wand absently at the wall and the three settled deeper into the couch as the wall shimmered and a scene flickered into view. A hush fell in the common room as the other students gathered around to watch the teacher's meeting.

"They can't see or hear us?" asked Hermione.

"Nope," Harry replied, wishing for a bit of popcorn. "This is the same charm Dobby used on Snape. So, what are we looking for?"

Hermione grinned and turned toward the wall. "They're eating my brownies. I made them and had a First Year give them to Percy as a gift."

"You can cook?" exclaimed Ron.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "A bit of focus, if you please, Ronald? Those brownies are laced with the same magical LSD that I put in Percy's salt water taffy."

Harry grinned. "This should be fun."

Back in the staff lounge, everyone had finished eating their brownies and several were helping themselves to a second.

"My first order of business is..." Percy said, swaying slightly.

"Greenhouses!" shouted Sprout, then she broke into a very girlish giggle.

Percy frowned at the interruption. "No, I hadn't planned on talking about greenhouses, Professor, but since you brought the subject up, do you know how much all that glass costs? And while we're on the subject, why aren't they called clearhouses? After all, they're not green!"

Snape stared at his hand for a moment then suddenly blurted, "I have five fingers!" He seemed surprised by this.

"And twelve toes," muttered Flitwick.

Snape blinked and looked at Flitwick in amazement. "Twelve? I could have sworn there were more."

McGonagall rolled her eyes at the pair. "Oh, really. Can we just get back on topic please? I want to know why we aren't served catnip with our pudding."

"I'm allergic to catnip," Sybil said from her corner. She took another bite of her second brownie and washed it down by taking a pull from the flask she always carried. "I predict great things will happen in this meeting. Earth shaking events!" She suddenly looked up anxiously at Hagrid.

Hagrid blinked and leaned away from her on his chair. "I didn' do anythin'," he replied. "So don' blame the Earth shaggin' on me."

"Professor!" Minerva gasped. "We are professional Professors. As such, we do not use the word shag!"

"I'll say she doesn't," muttered Snape bitterly, then he looked up at Minerva. "It's all right to tease though, isn't it, Minnie? Like you did at last year's Christmas p-p-party?"

"I want to talk about greenhouses!" shouted Sprout.

Back in the Gryffindor common room, Harry had to turn up the volume on the wall three times so that the teachers could be heard over the laughter.

"Teachers! Order! Order!" shouted Percy, who felt it necessary to climb onto the table and stamp his feet.

"Eureka!" shouted Vector. "It's obvious! Arithmancy needs to be taught while naked!"

Flitwick whipped his head around so fast everyone could hear his neck crack. He watched the younger Professor as she ripped open her robe and started to twirl it over her head.

"Someone pass me another brownie!" shouted Sinestra. She had fallen from her chair and was sitting on the floor, one hand groping blindly at the table.

Flitwick squeaked happily when Sinestra groped him by accident. A show and a bit of a grope, what more could he ask for? It had the potential to be the best staff meeting, ever!

Hermione grimaced. "Maybe I put too much LSD in those brownies."

Ron elbowed Harry in the ribs. "Look! Vector's a natural blond!" he exclaimed.

Harry shook his head. The young Arithmancy Professor was about to become very popular, now that she had been seen in such a state by the Gryffindor boys. He was more concerned about someone else in the room.

"Hermione, will your potion affect them all the same way?" he asked intently.

Hermione wiped the tears from her eyes and tried to control her laughter. "Well, it should," she replied thoughtfully.

"Even Hagrid? He's not fully human, you know," he pressed.

She frowned at him and turned to look at the image on the wall. Hagrid's face was turning a bright red and he was squirming uncomfortably. It looked as though he wanted to leave the room, but between Vector, who was now dancing next to him, and Sinestra on the floor in front of him, he was boxed in and unable to move.

"I don't think," Hermione started to say, then her eyes widened.

The sound coming from the wall was explosive, wet, and the Gryffindor's would later swear, strong enough for them to smell all the way to their common room.

Hagrid had passed gas. As he was half giant, it would stand to reason that his flatulence would be of equal proportions.

Unsure if it was the smell or the blast wave, the kids in the common room all watched, fascinated, as Vector collapsed across Hagrid's lap.

Professor Flitwick, small as he was, was knocked backward from the explosive outgassing and crashed into Professor Sprout.

Sprout, never one to miss an opportunity, held her colleague firmly and proceeded to kiss him breathless.

Snape looked up from examining his fingers, his nose crinkling. Turning to Minerva, he scowled. "Did you just fart? It really stinks in here."

Minerva, deciding enough was enough, tried to transform into her cat form.

Ever the teacher, the students learned a valuable, if humorous lesson from their Head of House. It seemed as though Hermione's LSD did not mix well with animagus transformations.

Minerva stared at herself, horrified to realize that something had gone terribly, terribly wrong. She had managed to get the ears and fur correct, but nothing else had changed. She was now a pointed eared, tabby Professor...with the sudden urge to cough up a hairball!

And she promptly did just that.

Snape looked down at the hairball in his lap. "Can it be the holy grail of p-p-potion ingredients?" he murmured in awe, then he looked at Minerva with profound respect. "Thank you. I owe you a debt that can never be p-p-paid. If you want, I'll have your baby for this."

Minerva purred loudly and moved her chair closer to Snape, who was now cradling the slimy mass in one hand protectively.

All of this went unnoticed by Percy, who was, by now, standing in the corner in just his boxers. He was busy lecturing a potted plant about the dangers of cauldron bottoms. He told the plant, quite seriously, that he checked his bottom at least once a month, whether he needed to or not.

"Turn it off! Turn it off!" everyone shouted as Minerva started to undo Snape's buttons.

Harry flicked his wand and the scene faded from the wall.

Ron covered his eyes. "My eyes! I'm scared for life," he moaned.

"Well, that's one staff meeting they'll remember," Hermione offered, then she reached into her bag and pulled out a platter. "Brownies anyone? I made them myself."

The room fell silent as all eyes turned toward her. She frowned for a moment, then began to laugh. "I assure you, they're quite normal." She set the platter on the table in front of the couch, then plucked a brownie from it and began to eat.

Minutes later, there was nothing left but a few crumbs.

"So, I guess this means we won't have Snape-cam tonight," Ginny said as she sat down on a chair near the couch.

"Somehow I doubt the Professor cares about the curse, let alone the 'cure', at the moment," Harry told her, smiling.

"I'm almost disappointed," she said, shaking her head. "His nightly bumbling through the forest is much more amusing than hairballs and hand jobs."

"Ginny!" Hermione and Ron both admonished.

She blinked at them innocently. "What?"

Hogsmeade Weekend, November 11th...

Headmaster Weasley, after much urging from the Professors, had canceled all Hogsmeade weekends as punishment for the student's rebellion.

Which was why, on a crisp morning in November, the students, minus the Slytherins who hadn't been seen in weeks, were making their merry way to the village. There had been some question as to whether the Professors would try to stop them. Hermione, however, had taken care of the issue with a platter of brownies and a few sprigs of catnip.

"Are you sure she knows what to do?" Harry murmured.

"Relax," Ron told him. "Luna and Ginny have been working on this for some time. She's got this."

"Besides, Rita isn't that bright," Hermione added. When they looked at her oddly, she sighed. "Honestly, I caught her in a jar. It took me almost three days to think of making the jar unbreakable. All she had to do before that point was transform. The jar would have shattered, freeing her. She admitted later that she'd never even thought of it."

The boys snickered.

Ginny joined them a few minutes later, out of breath, but grinning. "If all is going as planned, the interview should be starting any moment." Seeing Hermione's questioning look, she nodded. "Don't worry. I checked and Luna took a bag of lemon drops with her."

"Nice touch," Ron said.

Ginny grinned. "Especially since they're tainted with Hermione's special brew."

Laughter rang out through the chilly air as the small group reached the outskirts of the village.

The Three Broomsticks...

Luna calmly entered the Three Broomsticks, and with a wave to Madam Rosemerta, walked up the stairs to the room they had previously reserved.

Smiling softly, she opened the door.

"Professor Dumbledore!" exclaimed Rita Skeeter, "I was so pleased to accept your offer of an exclusive interview."

"Now, Rita, you know I'd do anything for one of our lovely alumni," replied the fake Dumbledore. Reaching into a pocket he withdrew a small sack and opened it. "Would you care for a lemon drop? I have them made special with my own secret recipe."

Rita smiled thinly and accepted one of the tainted candies.

"Please, Professor, won't you have a seat? I'm sure you'd like to be comfortable while we chat."

"Thank you, my dear," Dumbledore replied as he sat down.

Rita pulled several sheets of parchment out and laid a standard dicta-quill on top. Dumbledore had specifically requested she refrain from using her usual quick quotes quill and she had readily agreed in order to get the interview.

Pulling out another sheet, she briefly scanned the questions she wanted to ask, then she smiled at Dumbledore and repressed an urge to giggle.

"Now, Professor, I understand that you've been having some difficulties at the school this term? Something about a student rebellion?"

Dumbledore smiled and offered her another candy, which she absentmindedly accepted. "There's been nothing of the sort, my dear. Oh, we had a minor problem when we first announced our policy to ban oral sex, as one would expect. But since then, we've had no problems whatsoever."

Rita blinked and shook her head. "I'm sorry, but did you say you banned oral sex at the school?"

"Quite," replied Dumbledore with a twinkle in his eye. "My deputy noted that Hogwarts has one of the lowest teen pregnancy rates of any of the magical schools. Naturally I was appalled by that statistic and we took steps to correct the situation immediately."

Rita leaned forward in her seat. For some reason, she felt strangely flushed and hot. "How did your deputy react to that?"

Dumbledore waved a hand. "She was fairly calm, but I've known for years that Minerva hates oral sex with either gender."

Rita nodded and glanced over at her quill, making sure it was recording everything.

"Professor, I have been reliably informed that Minister Fudge is most unhappy with the happenings at the school this year. In fact, there are rumors going on that you've been permanently replaced as Headmaster."

Dumbledore leaned back on his chair and smiled. "The good Minister is upset, that much I will admit, but I have not been replaced. I've merely taken a short sabbatical in order to study sex magic of the Burnudu tribe of upstate New York. This strange cult is world famous for their interest in Phallic Transfiguration."

He paused and scratched at his crotch for a moment. "I fear the good Minister is suffering from exhaustion and stress. The fear he has of Lord Gnarlednuts is clouding his judgment. Also, I think he's not getting enough fiber in his diet. I know from personal experience that without enough fiber, I tend to get somewhat cranky."

"I see," Rita said hesitantly. She fanned at her robes and opened the top buttons in an attempt to cool off. "Professor, there are rumors going around about your potions professor. I've been told that he's

been seen in the forbidden forest, performing unspeakable acts. Have you any comment on that?"

"Rita," Dumbledore chided softly, then he offered her another tainted candy, which she eagerly took. "You can't fall for every rumor you hear. Why, just the other day I heard a rumor that Professor Flitwick was selling fire whiskey to the students. Did I believe it? Of course I didn't! I know Professor Flitwick and know that every time he has sold anything to our students, he's always kicked back a fair amount to the staff Christmas party fund."

"So you deny your potions master is running through the forest, naked, trying to have sex with unicorns?" she pressed.

"Absolutely. Severus Snape has suffered mightily at the hands of Lord Pimplebutt, but no more than any other Death Eater turned spy for my side of the war, of which there are several. Lucius Malfoy has been particularly effective in bringing us valuable information about specific Death Eaters and their crimes.

"No, Severus may be a bit eccentric, but no more than any of the other staff members. Severus knows not to molest the unicorns in the forest. He learned what happens in situations like that from Madam Umbridge, after she participated in that Centaur orgy. The woman still can't walk without bowed legs."

Rita nodded and kicked off her shoes, then she leaned forward and plucked the entire bag of candies from Dumbledore's hand. "Speaking of Madam Umbridge, what do you think about her becoming a wanted felon?"

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "I'm sure it was all a big misunderstanding. Besides, we all have hobbies, you know. Why, I knew one man who went around marking his friends with a dark tattoo. Quite harmless really."

"The fact that she injured a student doesn't bother you?" she pressed.

He waved off her concern with a benign smile. "Not really. The little shit was always shoving a camera in my face. Little menace. I knew that, sooner or later, it would lead him into trouble."

"But I thought Colin Creevy was the one with the camera?" Rita said in confusion.

Dumbledore chuckled. "Dennis, Colin, what difference does it make? Muggle born all look the same to me."

"So, Professor," she said around a mouthful of candy, "Tell me about the fight you're having with Harry Potter."

"That boy!" Dumbledore said with a bit of a huff. "I have tried my best to make sure he's been properly guided since his entry into our world and he simply refuses to listen to me anymore. It was easier in the beginning. He was nice and pliable and willing to sit on my lap anytime I asked. But now?" He leaned closer to Rita and whispered in a conspiratorial tone. "He's discovered them. Every since then he just isn't interested in listening to me and absolutely refuses to play hide the broomstick!"

Rita blinked. "Them, Professor?" she asked.

He looked around the room, then hissed. "Girls!"

"Girls?"

"That's right! Why, if I didn't know it would cause other problems, I'd expel the lot of them from the school."

Rita blinked again, and noted that the room changed colors every time she blinked. "Wait, what? You'd expel all of the girls?"

"Of course! How can I protect Harry and his broomstick from them if they are always throwing themselves at him?" Dumbledore grimaced. "And that Ginny Weasley! I'd like to pull her hair out by the roots. Not that he looks upon her as anything but a friend, but I know where her thoughts are leading her. After all, who wouldn't want Harry?"

Rita stared at the Headmaster for a few moments, before her eyes closed. She slowly slumped sideways in her chair and began to snore softly.

Luna sighed. She really had let a little too much of her own personality slip out with the last part of the interview.

She stood and checked her watch. There was still twenty minutes left on the Polyjuice potion and she wondered what Hagrid would do if she made a pass at him in this form.

With a sweep of her robes, she left the stoned, snoring reporter to sleep off the lemon drops. No doubt it would be an interesting article.

Madam Malkin's, later that morning...

Albus Dumbledore walked into Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions and glanced around casually. New robes were in order. Something along more formal lines than his usual, garish attire.

A young, perky sales girl approached him and asked if she could be of assistance. She was a bit nervous, as he was Albus Dumbledore, and Madam Malkin would skin her if she cost the shop a sale.

Some time later, Dumbledore strolled out of the store, his purchases shrunk down and placed in a pocket of his robe. He left behind two horrified shop girls and one furiously scandalized shop owner.

"Don't worry, my dears," Madam Malkin told her employees. "I will be lodging a complaint with the Ministry about this. Imagine, a man that old, pinching my bum?"

"At least he aimed for your bum. That dirty old man pinched my nipples!" Tess said, shuddering and crossing her arms over her chest.

They both looked at Leanna, who sat, weeping quietly, her legs tightly crossed. "I don't think I'll ever feel clean again!" she moaned.

A little over an hour later, Dumbledore bolted out of the Apothecary shop, ducking at the sound of a jar shattering against the door.

"And don't ever come back," a man bellowed from the shop.

Glancing around, Albus nodded to himself, quite pleased. He'd managed to visit a number of shops in the last hour. Whistling and ignoring the glares and muttered slurs aimed at him, as word of his behavior had spread throughout Diagon Alley already, he made his way to the Leaky Cauldron to have a few words with Tom.

He couldn't wait to get back home and share the memories with his brother. His only regret was being unable to take pictures for the gang back at Hogwarts.

Hogwarts, late that night, The Summoning...

The classroom was dank and dark, with nearly two inches of dust covering the floor. The room, and indeed the entire wing, had gone unused for decades.

Kreacher levitated the large box carefully into a corner. "I know the truth. Dark Lord? Pfft! Wait until they understand Master better. Then they'll know fear."

Moving various pieces of furniture around, he made space for what was to come.

After placing several bottles of high energy restoration potions in front of the box, he then moved toward the door. The potion was his own creation and was a vast improvement on the human version, with a little extra something to get things going in the right direction.

"Master will make the Torso's minions pay in blood." He cocked his head to the side. "There might even be entrails." He cackled then, and danced a quick jig. "After Master sees what I've done here, it will be Kreacher who stands by his side, not Dobby!"

Turning to face the box, he removed the bindings around it and moved quickly to the door. Once he was out of range, he lifted both hands and clapped twice.

A bright glow climbed up the walls and Kreacher nodded as the room was hidden from humans and Hogwarts bound elves. Finally, he opened the door to the old classroom and vanished, returning to Grimmauld Place.

The door to the refrigerator slowly swung open and a dim, yellow light emanated from the interior. A large purple tentacle extended out from the box. It flailed around for a moment before an eye at the tip opened and looked around.

Spotting the potions on the floor, several more tentacles shot out and grabbed them, pulling them back into the refrigerator. A few

moments later, the empty bottles shot outward to smash against the far wall.

With each potion consumed, the refrigerator grew a little larger and the light from within grew brighter.

The purple tentacle remaining outside the box thickened considerably, and the eye turned a deep blood shot red. It swiveled around, examining it's new location, before spotting the open door. Staring at the door, the tentacle slowly retracted into the refrigerator.

The door opened further and the interior of the refrigerator started to pulse with a sickly purple light.

"THRUMMMM THRUMMMM THRUMMMM."

The beast called and the noise transmitted to the very stones of Hogwarts. The Summoning had begun.

The Gathering...

They faded slowly, silently, from their locations. From trunks and book bags, from library shelves and classrooms. In all cases, they left behind their bonds. The ropes, the chains, the magical bindings, all fell away as they were freed for a greater task.

They appeared in the class room, one by one. They lay, waiting and silent, for the Horde to assemble.

Soon every surface of the room was covered with them. And eyes appeared on each one. Red, malevolent eyes,. Hungry eyes, to match mouths full of teeth.

At some unseen signal, the door to the refrigerator opened.

"THRUMMMM THRUMMMM THRUMMMM," the Mother from within called.

"OMMMM OMMMM OMMMM!" chanted the books, baring their fangs. Poisonous saliva dripped from their teeth to burn holes in the floor. The Monster Books of Monsters had assembled and they were hungry for man meat.

The Mother waved its tentacles in an complex pattern and a series of images flashed in the air. Images of Professors and Slytherins. It was teaching them how to recognized their prey.

The image of Snape was repeated frequently, along with Draco Malfoy. The Horde chittered and gnashed their teeth. It had been many long years since they last fed. They were hungry and never before had they assembled in such numbers. The Horde would rule this place and turn it into the Hive, all for the greater glory of the Mother.

The Mother waved its tentacles one last time, then slammed the door of the refrigerator shut.

One by one, the Horde vanished from the room. The hunt was on.

Hogwarts, the next morning...

Albus Dumbledore walked up the path to Hogwarts, glad to be back. The Ministry had recalled Percy and he'd left Hogwarts, his tail figuratively tucked between his legs.

He remembered Fudge's frustration earlier that morning when the man finally admitted that his hand picked replacements had done no better than Dumbledore when it came to controlling the students. He smiled at the memory as he pushed open the doors of his school and stepped inside the entrance hall.

The pure wall of sound that met him nearly knocked him on his ass.

He looked around uncomprehendingly. Students and staff alike ran this way and that, screaming and leaping about. Several students clung to staircase railings, while some seemed to cling to the very walls like oversized spiders. And one energetic youth had manged, somehow, to reach the great chandelier and was currently hanging on for dear life.

"What in the world?" Albus wondered aloud. Clapping his hands over his ears, he took a step forward, then paused when something pulled at him from behind.

Turning, he found a book tugging at his robe. No, on closer inspection, it was trying to eat his robe. Shaking his head, he drew his wand.

Snape entered the entrance hall just in time to see Dumbledore draw his wand. Shaking his head, he drew his own and waited.

"Stupefy!" Dumbledore called, his wand pointed at the book.

Blinking, Albus slowly sat up and looked around.

"Awake, I see," Poppy said as she moved toward him.

"The infirmary? But why?" he asked, confused.

"Severus said you tried to stun one of the books. We learned very early this morning that the damn things have some sort of built in immunity," she told him. "He managed to get you away from them, though you were slightly chewed."

"Books?"

"The Monster Book of Monsters. And not just the copies in the castle. Hagrid reckons that every copy of the book in Britain now resides at Hogwarts. The bad news is, they may very well be breeding."

"And the good news?" Albus asked as he swung his legs around and put his feet on the floor.

Poppy snorted. "Good news? Not likely. The news just gets worse."

"Oh?"

"Yes, Headmaster. It would appear that not only are they breeding, but they're also trying to eat the students and staff." She shook her head. "And they're doing a damn fine job of it. Malfoy had his right gluteal muscle chewed off and he was pumped full of venom."

"His what?" Dumbledore asked, shaking his head to clear the cobwebs.

She sighed. "He lost his right ass cheek!" At his shocked expression, she blushed slightly. "I won't apologize. I've had a hell of a day, and

it's barely begun. Students and staff alike have been chewed on and envenomed all morning. I get them healed up and they head back out to fight. Frankly, I think we're losing this one."

"Not if I can help it," Dumbledore said as he stood up. "I will gather the rest of the staff and we will form a plan to regain control. You will stay here and attend to any wounded who come in."

"Yeah, good luck with that," she told him cynically, as he walked toward the door. "Oh, and you might want to watch where you step out there!"

Gryffindor Common Room...

Hermione was uncomfortable, but was unable to shift around for fear of falling. The fireplace mantle was not really that high, but her balance was precarious, causing her acrophobia to take over. The alternative, however, was not an option.

Looking around, she found herself wanting to laugh and cry at the same time. The students of Gryffindor House, those brave lions, were all perched on top of furniture, shelves, bookcases and stair railings. Several members of the old Quidditch team were hovering on their brooms.

Below them all was chaos. Books, dozens of them, moved about on the floor, an undulating wave of furry, slathering, chittering books.

She looked at the stair to the dorms and shook her head. It would be a simple matter to fly everyone up. Unfortunately, as Neville had discovered earlier that morning as he came out of the showers, the dorms were as infested as the common room. She glanced at him and grimaced. The poor guy clung tightly to the stair rail, wearing nothing but a bath towel wrapped around his waist.

A sudden flash of light caused several screams.

"Colin!" Ginny barked for her spot on a nearby bookcase. "Stop taking pictures, you little shit. You know the light excites them!"

"But, Ginny, when will we ever see something like this again?" the boy whined.

"Hagrid's next class, I should imagine," Hermione muttered.

"Colin, if you're not careful, you're going to slip from the rail. Letting go to take a picture isn't the smartest action in this situation," Harry commented.

"Though you would make a nice snack. While they feed on you, we might be able to get the hell out of here," Ron told him.

The fireplace flared up, causing Hermione to flinch and nearly slip off the mantle. "Whoever did that, I'm going to kick you in the..."

"Good morning, Headmaster," Ginny bellowed, trying to drown out Hermione's comment.

Her fellow Gryffindors looked at her as though she'd lost her mind.

"Ah, Miss Weasley. Good morning to you. And how is Gryffindor House this morning?" The floating head of Albus Dumbledore asked.

"Oh, we're just fine," Dean said, smiling at the Headmaster. "We've just been discussing which first years to feed to the books."

"Pardon?" the Headmaster asked. "I'm not sure I heard that correctly."

"Well, we figured that if we tossed enough first years down on the floor, the books will be distracted long enough for the rest of us to escape," Seamus explained.

"As we've been explaining to the firsties, our house is known for bravery. As such, we're asking for volunteers before we just start chucking the little buggers down, willy-nilly," Lavender added.

Dumbledore frowned, not sure if the students were serious or not. "I think we can save you trouble of sacrificing your housemates," he told them.

"Oh, it's no trouble," Parvati said cheerfully. "To be honest, some of the little blighters deserve it."

Several first years took exception to her comment and began to complain loudly.

"Be that as it may," Dumbledore interrupted, looking as stern as a floating head can look, "the reason I called was to inform you that the staff and I have come up with a plan to regain control of the school. We've managed to move most of the students who'd left their common rooms to a safe location, and I will be fire calling the other houses, as I am doing with yours. You are all to stay where you are. We will come to you when we are able."

"Yeah, like we have a choice?" Harry muttered, staring down at the books below him.

"Are there any questions?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yeah," Harry said. "When did you get back and what happened to Headmaster Weasley?"

"He was a nice guy. A little strange, but he was a good Headmaster," Seamus said with a straight face.

"Mr. Weasley has returned to the Ministry," Dumbledore told them cheerfully.

"Didn't Minister Fudge replaced you due to your incompetence?" Harry asked.

"Of course not!" Dumbledore snapped, scowling. "I merely took a short leave of absence for personal reasons!"

As the students began to fire questions at him about his leave, Dumbledore raised his voice. "Enough! Stay in your common room while the staff and I deal with the books. You will be informed when it is safe to leave!"

With that, the fire flared once more, and Dumbledore was gone.

Hermione tightened her grip on the mantle. "I wish he'd stop doing that," she muttered.

"You know, I always loved flying, but hovering on a broom for several hours is chafing," Ron said to no one in particular.

Several hours later...

"All right, so we don't have carnivorous books chasing us through the halls, but how is this any better?" Hermione complained, as she held up her wet robe and scowled. She was beginning to think they should have eaten lunch in the common room.

Dumbledore's answer to the problem had been to flood the school floors in a foot of water. The books had drowned, true, but the castle had shook horribly for several seconds, then a keening thrum could be heard throughout the school. No one was sure what made the sound, and that made everyone a bit nervous.

They still weren't allowed out of their common rooms, as the staff was still investigating the cause of the books turning feral, and there had been that disturbing sound once they'd all died. Not that anyone listened, of course. Most of the students had left their common rooms once the books had died.

"So, we get a little wet," Ron said, shrugging. "You have to admit, the first years are having fun."

"True," she murmured, watching a group of the younger students conjure a few more rubber ducks and set them to floating down the corridor.

"Where did they learn it from?" Ginny asked.

"Harry," Ron and Hermione both answered.

Neville laughed. "He's enjoying himself, isn't he?"

"And it's about time," Ron said, grinning.

As they got closer to the Great Hall, they could hear music playing, and children laughing. Looking at each other questioningly, they began to walk quicker, splashing their way to the Hall.

They found the doors to the Hall closed. Unsure of what they'd find, Ron and Neville opened them carefully, and they gaped at what they saw.

The House and staff tables had been removed, but the room was crowded with students. Ice skating students. Harry leaned against the far wall, watching, a grin spread across his face.

Ron, Ginny, Neville and Hermione did their best to make their way through the skating students to reach Harry's side.

"Nice work," Neville commented, then slipped and grabbed Ron.

They both crashed to the ground, tangled together and grumbling.

Harry shook his head. "Why didn't you guys just transfigure your shoes to skates?"

"Didn't think of it," Ron muttered as he tried to climb to his feet.

"Wouldn't do me any good," Neville said, then grunted as he hit the ground again. "I can't skate!"

Harry grinned. "Neither can I, Nev. That's why I added spikes to my shoes." He lifted one shoe and showed them the metal spikes embedded in the soles.

After sorting everyone out, Ginny and Ron went skating, while Hermione and Neville stood with Harry, no longer having problems with the ice.

"Maybe we should turn all the water to ice," Hermione said. "It would be better than wet robes."

"The smell of all that wet fabric is getting a bit pungent, but why ruin the fun the younger kids are having? They don't mind the wet at all," Harry told her.

"Nice job with the ducks," Neville told him.

"Thanks. It's driving Dumbledore nuts. He thought they were cute, at first. But he found his office quickly stuffed with the squeaky toys."

"And how did that happen?" Hermione asked.

"I have no idea," Harry said, his eyes gleaming.

"What is going on in here?" A voice they all knew bellowed. "You brats were told to stay in your common rooms!"

Most of the students ignored the newcomer, but a few stopped skating to watch.

Snape looked around the hall and, spotting Harry, charged across the room, only to slip on the ice and skid the rest of the way on his ass.

Harry wasn't concerned as the Professor careened across the hall, as he was sure the wall would stop him. The grunt he heard at impact was rather satisfying.

"P-P-Potter," Snape stuttered as he tried, unsuccessfully, to climb to his feet, "what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Well, I was watching the kids skate. But I have to say, watching you fall on your ass over and over is much more entertaining," Harry said, smiling as the man fell once more.

"It would seem the other students agree with you, Harry," Hermione said with a laugh.

Snape looked around and his face flamed in embarrassment. The students had stopped skating and were now watching the formerly feared Potions Professor flounder around on the ice. Many were laughing outright.

Before the Professor could act, Harry drew his wand and stunned him. Turning slightly, he flicked his wand at the Hall doors and they slammed shut and locked.

"All right, students, gather round," Harry called.

"What are you doing?" Hermione asked him as the students skated over.

"Teaching, of course. This is a school, you know."

Once the students had gathered around, Harry began his lecture.

"What we're going to learn today, class, is the Obliviate spell. We have a willing subject here at our feet, and we shall practice until we have mastered it," he told them.

Neville looked down at the unconscious Professor. "Willing?"

"Do you see him complaining?" Harry asked. Looking around, he grew serious. "Now, the one thing we cannot touch is his memory of potions. If we remove that ability, there will be no reason for Dumbledore to keep him on staff. Also, please don't remove his ability to remember how to breath." He glared around and noticed a few disappointed looks.

"And why would either of those be a problem?" Ginny asked.

Ron shook his head at his sister. "Think, Ginny. Who else are we going to use as a test subject in the future if he's forced to leave the school or dies?"

"Oh, right. Didn't think of that."

"So, everyone watch closely. The Obliviate spell is cast like this. Pay particular attention to my wand movements," Harry told them before turning to Snape.

What followed was a pleasant ten minutes of students swishing and flicking their wands at the hated Professor, who remained oblivious to it all.

Gryffindor Common Room, later that evening...

Lavender entered the common room and grinned as her housemates looked at her expectantly.

"Now how did I know you'd all be waiting for me?" she asked.

"Because we sent you off to gather information?" Colin asked, practically bouncing on his toes. "So, what did you find out?"

Moving to a chair near the fire place, she sat down and waited for everyone to move closer. "Well, Snape did end up in the infirmary. He was still there when I walked in, and Dumbledore was yelling at him," she told them seriously.

"Yelling?" Parvati asked. "Why?"

"Well, it seems that our good Professor has forgotten the Headmaster's name. He keeps calling him Professor Butt-Fucker, and I have to say, he makes it sound quite natural!" She looked at them wide-eyed for a moment, then began to laugh.

Harry cocked his head. "I wonder who thought of that one," he asked, looking around at those gathered.

"That would be me," Ginny told him quietly.

Ron, Neville, Hermione and Harry stared at her, astonished.

"What?" she asked, squirming slightly. "They both deserve it." She scowled when they wouldn't stop staring at her. "What did you guys do?"

Hermione shrugged. "Our favorite Professor no longer remembers how to take house points."

Neville frowned. "Well, that's a waste of a good Obliviate, isn't it? With his stutter, the hourglasses haven't been able to remove points."

"Yeah, well, I was pressed for time," Hermione muttered.

"What did you do, Neville?" Harry ask, curious.

He shrugged. "Assuming Hogwarts is still open next year, the Professor won't be looming over me in class any longer."

"Ah. I should have guessed that one." Harry turned to Ron. "And you?"

"Let's just say that Snape's going to have to go through potty training all over again."

"God, Ron! Having him spit on us all the time isn't enough? Now we get to deal with his - " Hermione shuddered at the thought.

"Brilliant," Neville said, laughing.

"The twins would be proud," Ginny added.

Laughing, Ron turned to Harry. "So, what did you do to him?"

"I played clean up, of course." When they stared him uncomprehendingly, he shrugged. "I removed his memories of entering the Great Hall this afternoon. He doesn't remember seeing the students ice skating, or anything that happened afterward."

Lavender joined them a few minutes later. "You don't think anyone removed his memory of trying to find the cure for his curse, do you?" she asked the group.

The looked at each other speculatively.

"I wouldn't think so," Neville finally said. "That would actually be helping him, wouldn't it?"

"True." Harry agreed. "We'll keep checking Snape-cam, just in case."

"What excuse did you give Madam Pomfrey for going to see her?" Ginny asked Lavender.

"I told her I needed a potion for my menstrual cramps."

The boys looked at her, horrified.

"What?" she asked. "It's perfectly natural."

"I don't want to hear about this," Ron said, plugging his ears.

"Don't you love how he's matured this year?" Hermione asked no one in particular.

"I hadn't noticed you talking to us about menstrual cramps or how your flow was going this month, Hermione," Harry said, sarcastically.

She turned to him, wide eyed. "I didn't know you were so interested in female menstruation. But since you asked, I'm regular, and my flow is generally light, with little cramping."

He blanched. "Right. Forget I said anything."

In the boys dorm later that night, Harry closed the curtains around his bed, cast a privacy charm, then took a deep breath.

"Dobby, Kreacher!" he called.

Both house elves appeared a moment later, standing on the bed.

"Master called?" they both asked, then glared at each other.

"Don't start," Harry warned them. "And yes, I did call. I want to know which one of you is responsible for the books."

"Books?" Dobby asked, puzzled.

Kreacher looked down at his toes and said nothing.

"Right, that answers the question, doesn't it?" He glared at Kreacher. "Care to explain?"

The house elf looked up him, his expression fierce. "Kreacher couldn't let Dobby win!"

"Win?"

"Dobby got Master's broom back. Dobby sunk the Hogwarts boats. Dobby chained up the nasty toad woman. Dobby was winning, so Kreacher had to prove that he's better than Dobby!" the old elf snarled and glared at his foe.

"By turning a bunch of carnivorous books loose on the school?" Harry asked incredulously.

Kreacher shrugged. "It worked, didn't it?"

"Did Kreacher never think that maybe Harry Potter was in danger from the books?" Dobby asked, rather smug.

Kreacher expression was blank for a moment before turning sly. "Kreacher, unlike Dobby, has faith in the Master's ability to protect himself."

Dobby spun and launched himself at Kreacher so quick, Harry had no time to react.

Tackling the old house elf, Dobby proceeded to pummel his rival, though Kreacher seemed to be giving as good as he got.

"The next elf to throw a punch will be dismissed from service!" Harry bellowed.

Both elves froze.

"Better. Dobby, get off Kreacher and both of you stand up."

As they scrambled to obey, he wondered if Madam Pomfrey would give him a potion for the headache he he felt coming on.

"Kreacher, what did you do to make the books attack?" Harry asked.

The elf frowned. "They are not books."

"Of course they are. Hagrid uses them for his -" He broke off as the elf shook his head.

"Master is wrong. What Master thinks of as books are actually magical creatures."

"They're alive?" Harry asked, astonished.

Kreacher nodded. "Many, many years ago, before magical protection spells were created, wizards used the creatures to protect valuable items. Sometime later, a wizard discovered he could force the creatures to change shape, and used them to protect his manuscripts and family grimoire. It worked so well, he went into business, binding valuable books for others. That business is still around today."

"So, the Monster Book of Monsters was actually alive," Harry mused.

"No, just the bindings," Kreacher corrected. "The pages were just parchment."

"And the whole thing about stroking the spine of the book?"

"That was to signal to the creature that the person doing the stroking was the rightful owner."

"Right," Harry murmured thoughtful. "So, how did they get loose?"

Kreacher tugged at one ear and looked at him apprehensively.

"You're not in trouble," Harry told him quietly. "Actually, your timing couldn't have been better. Dumbledore came back to the castle to find it infested with man-eating books."

"I know," Kreacher said smugly.

"How did you -" Harry began, then shook his head. "No, I don't want to know. Now, tell me how the books got loose."

"Kreacher has been busy for several weeks, brewing potions," the elf told him.

"And stinking up the house," Dobby muttered.

"Then Dobby should have stayed out of the cellar."

"Enough!" Harry snapped at the them. "I'd like to get to the end of the story sometime before the sun rises."

Kreacher turned back to him and shrugged. "The creatures have a hive mind. What one knows, all know. I used the first potion on one creature to imprint the knowledge of how to remove its bonds. It taught the others."

"And the second potion?" Harry asked, almost afraid of the answer.

"That one Kreacher used on the Bundimun in the refrigerator."

"Bundimun?" Harry asked. "Wait. Isn't that some sort of fungus?"

"That's what it started out as," Kreacher confirmed. "But the people who stayed in the house before Master came kept many things in the refrigerator. Strange, noxious things that the Bundimun ... ate? Absorbed? Kreacher isn't sure how that worked. He only knows that the Bundimun grew and became something else."

"A fungus with tentacles?"

The elf grinned. "Something like that. The second potion increased its intelligence and made it able to communicate with the book creatures, but Kreacher only fed the potion to it after he moved it."

"Moved it?" Harry asked. "Where?"

"Kreacher is getting to that part," the old elf told him. "Master will ruin Kreacher's story if he keeps interrupting."

He blinked. "Right. Carry on, then."

"Kreacher then moved the refrigerator to an old, unused room in Hogwarts. Then, Kreacher cast a ward to keep humans and house elves away. Once that was done, Kreacher put the potion bottles on the floor, opened the door to the Bundimun's home, and left.

"Since Master says the books were loose and trying to eat people, Kreacher knows his plan worked. The Bundimun, thanks to Kreacher's potion, was able to communicate with the hive mind, call them forth and direct them."

"And then Dumbledore killed them all," Harry said, a bit shocked. "Kreacher, please tell me that your little stunt didn't cause the extinction of -"

"Of course not," the elf interrupted, looking offended. "Kreacher wouldn't do that. Kreacher couldn't do that, as they breed like rabbits." He thought for a moment. "They might be hard to find in Britain for a few years, though."

"Yeah, I'm definitely going to need that headache potion," Harry muttered, rubbing his temples. "Where is the Bundimun now?"

"It's safe. No one will find it and it can't cross Kreacher's ward." He then looked at Dobby. "Top that," he said smugly.

Dobby scowled. "Once I finish collecting Harry Potter's harem, Kreacher won't stand a chance!"

"Harem? What the hell are you talking about?" Harry exclaimed.

"Dobby is making a list of all eligible, pretty girls for inclusion in Harry Potter's harem," Dobby said, a little put out that his surprise gift was now known.

"No! I forbid it, Dobby. There will be no harem!" Harry told him firmly. "While I appreciate the gesture, I have a bit too much going on right now to worry about a girlfriend, let alone many girlfriends!"

He looked between the elves, who were glaring at each other, and rubbed his face tiredly. "What is it with you two, anyway? Why do you seem to be competing with each other?"

"Because we are," Dobby said, staring at Harry strangely.

"Over what?"

"Head elf," Kreacher and Dobby said, then glared at each other again.

"I really wish you two would give full explanations," Harry told them tiredly. "Head of what, exactly?"

"Head house elf for the Black family," Kreacher said.

"Or the Potter family," Dobby added, a bit puzzled. "Harry Potter is Head of both families now, and the Potter family has no elves left. Dobby checked."

"So, let me see if I understand. Everything the two of you have done so far is because you're competing to be the Head elf of the family?" Harry asked, a bit incredulous.

The elves looked at each other for a long moment.

"Well, yes," Kreacher said slowly.

"And because Dobby and Kreacher were having fun," Dobby added truthfully.

Harry sighed and leaned back against the headboard of the bed. "You've both caused as much chaos around here as I have this year," he told them. "And while it's worked out so far, I think we need

to solve this issue before one of you blows up the castle with all of us still in it."

Both elves looked highly offended, but wisely remained silent.

Sitting up, he looked at Kreacher. "You've been with the Black's forever, so you're officially the Head elf for the Black family."

Kreacher let out a cheer, but before he could turn to Dobby to rub it in, Harry held up a hand.

"I'm not done," he said. Turning to Dobby, he smiled at the dejected elf. "I find myself the Head of two families. As such, you will be the Head elf for the Potter family."

Dobby grinned. "Dobby always knew Harry Potter was wise."

"But Grimmauld," Kreacher began, looking confused.

"Is both Black and Potter," Harry said firmly. "You will both reside there and attend to the duties of your House."

Dobby and Kreacher looked at each other for a few moments before Kreacher finally shrugged. "It works."

Dobby agreed.

"You will both treat each other with respect, or you will answer to me," Harry told them. "If there are any problems between the two of you, they will be brought to me. Is that understood?"

When the elves nodded, he asked about his house guest.

Kreacher cackled for a moment. "Kreacher thinks that Master's house guest is wishing he had recruited the red-heads to his cause. Through them, he has learned what true evil is."

"Evil?" Harry asked, growing alarmed.

"Harry Potter has seen and experienced some of their products," Dobby reminded him. "They are mostly harmless, but Harry Potter's house guest does not like knowing he is ensuring the safety of such

frivolous pranks. He reminds the twins several times a day that he is the Dark Lord and is to be feared."

"And what do the twins say to that?" Harry asked, then almost regretted it.

Dobby tilted his head slightly. "They start singing a song, sir, and marching around. Dobby doesn't know its name, but it drives the Dark One crazy."

"This is the song that never ends," Kreacher suddenly belted out. "Yes, it goes on and on my friend -"

"Stop!" Harry shouted, covering his ears. "God, I know that song. My cousin used to sing it all the time when we were little. It was the only thing he ever memorized." He shuddered.

Kreacher grinned. "Will there be anything else, Master?"

"Yes. No. Ah, hell. It's stuck in my head now." He waved them away. "Go home and behave yourselves."

The next morning, Harry did his best to avoid Hermione. He knew she was upset, but didn't realize just how bad it was until she found him in the library.

He saw her enter and tried to slip into the stacks, but she cornered him near the restricted section.

"I hate you with a fiery passion right now," she growled as she advanced on him.

"Erm, hi, Hermione," he said, trying to slip around her. "I'm rather busy at the moment and really need -"

She grabbed him by the robe and yanked him to a stop. "A first year Hufflepuff says you're the one who started it, Potter."

"Well, that might be the case. I've started a lot of things this year. But unless you're a little more specific, I don't see how I can help you."

She leaned in until their noses were nearly touching. "You started it. Admit it. You went around to some of the first years and taught them that damn song!"

"Song? What song would that be? Maybe if you sang a bit of it I could -"

She shoved him away and grabbed her head. "Damn you, Harry, I can't get it out of my head. Every first year, and even some of the older students, are walking around singing it. Hell, McGonagall was humming it when I passed her on my way to lunch! Do you have any idea -"

As she seemed to understand the problem, Harry felt he wasn't needed and slipped out of the library.

A special issue of The Daily Prophet had been delivered at lunch and the Great Hall was silent as both students and staff avidly read Headmaster Albus Dumbledore's exclusive interview. Even the Slytherins, who rarely left their common room these days, were sitting at their table, engrossed in the article.

While the students enjoyed the read, the staff would have liked nothing more than to throw down their copies in disgust. However, it was like watching a train wreck in slow motion; one wants to look away, but can't.

Harry looked up at the head table and nearly laughed out loud. Dumbledore was holding his head in his hands as Minerva shook the paper at him and looked to be yelling. Since he couldn't hear what she was saying, he could only assume she'd placed a privacy charm around the two of them.

Snape was glaring at him, as well. The fact that the press had announced his visits to the Forbidden Forest, and put the most perverted spin on his little jaunts as possible, made him furious.

Glancing down at the paper once more, Harry scowled, then stood up. "I must protest," he began loudly, drawing the attention of both students and staff.

"What are we protesting this time?" Hannah asked from the Hufflepuff table.

"It says here that the Headmaster has banned oral sex at Hogwarts. I find that appalling!" He jumped to the top of the table and turned a slow circle, looking at the students. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I demand oral sex!"

Luna stood up and smiled whimsically at him. "All you had to do was ask, Harry."

Several young women nodded in agreement.

"You're not his type," Malfoy drawled from the Slytherin table. "According to Dumbledore, Harry's into old men."

Ron raised an eyebrow and looked at Blaise. "You still allow him to speak?"

Zabini shrugged. "He's learning impaired, but we keep trying."

He'd barely finished speaking when three quarters of the Slytherin students turned on Malfoy, wands drawn.

Snape rolled his eyes as spells flew at the Malfoy heir. "Not again." Standing, he made his way to his house's table and picked up the unconscious blonde, then looked at his students. "While I am happy to see you out of your common room, I would ask that you not embarrass me or our house like this again. Your spell work is atrocious and your choice of hexes and jinxes was juvenile."

"We'll be sure to practice, once Malfoy's recovered," Davis promised.

"Do," Snape drawled, eyeing them for a moment before toting Malfoy to the infirmary.

Harry climbed off the table and sat down. "Who let them out of their common room?" he asked.

Ron shrugged. "There's only so much Malfoy torturing one can do before growing bored. I think this was a sort of test run to see if the little menace had learned anything yet."

"Seems he needs a few more lessons," Dean said as he watched Snape disappear out the door.

"The Slytherins will take care of it," Ginny told him. "They're not so bad now."

Lavender laughed. "Sand fleas and a bout of puking will teach even the dimmest people to mind their manners."

"Really?" Seamus asked. "Then how do you explain Malfoy?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Inbreeding," she told him seriously.

"Ah," he said, nodding.

Several people glanced up when a Snowy owl flew in.

The owl landed on the table in front of Harry and barked softly.

Harry took the letter from her, then pulled a live mouse from his pocket and handed it to his familiar.

When the bird tore into the mouse, Hermione paled. "Harry?" she said, her voice quavering.

"Hmmm?"

"Must you give Hedwig live treats? Can't you give her bacon or a slice of ham instead?"

Harry looked up from the letter he had been reading and shook his head. "She's a bird of prey. Bacon and ham aren't part of her normal diet, unless Snowy owls have started taking down pigs. Mice, on the other hand, are part of her natural diet and she loves them. If I gave her table scraps and whatnot all the time, I'd make her sick."

Hedwig glared at Hermione, mouse guts hanging from her beak.

Hermione swallowed uncomfortably and pushed her plate away.

Ron nodded. "That's right. I feed Pig grasshoppers all the time. Right better than owl treats." He turned to look at Harry. "Anything important?" he asked, nodding toward the letter.

"Oh, this?" he asked, grinning. "It seems the twins have been playing with the pillow case full of Dumbledore hair."

Hermione buried her face in her hands. "Oh, Lord help us. What did they do?"

Harry opened his mouth to reply, but was interrupted when the doors of the Great Hall banged open. Minister Fudge stood in the doorway with a young girl, Madam Amelia Bones and four aurors, including Shacklebolt and Tonks.

"That's him!" screamed the girl, who couldn't be older than twenty. "He's the one, the bleedin' pervert! He told me I had the prettiest nipples he'd ever seen and offered me twenty galleons to play with them!"

The silence that followed was absolute. Heads quickly swiveled toward the Headmaster.

"You cad!" Hufflepuff Charity Duncan, sister of Verity, shouted. "You told me my nipples were the prettiest, but you didn't offer me any money!" She then collapsed onto her seat and sobbed loudly, thanks in part to a Weasley Wizarding Wheeze.

Hufflepuff, ever the loyal house, rallied around their own and glared daggers at the perverted Headmaster.

"How would Dumbledore know?" asked Neville in confusion.

"It's a special charm on his glasses," answered Colin. "I've been saving up for months for a camera lens that will do the same thing. I asked the Headmaster about the charm once, but he refused to share it with me."

Fudge practically ran up the aisle to the head table. It would have been impressive, had he not been puffing like a bellows. Ron's tripping hex didn't help the Minister's image much, as the man fell and skidded the last six feet.

Fudge bounced to his feet and glared around the room ominously. "Who did that?" he yelled.

Shacklebolt coughed and Fudge glanced over at him sourly, then nodded. He had more important matters to attend to.

"Dumbledore," he said, turning to the still stunned Headmaster. "We've had a number of complaints about you and I'm afraid we have no choice. You need to come with us. We have a number of questions to ask you."

"But I've done nothing wrong!" exclaimed Dumbledore, standing and looking at Cornelius with righteous indignation.

Charity sobbed louder and the young woman next to Tonks began to weep.

"Headmaster," said Amelia Bones, "these two women represent only some of the complaints we've received this morning. Amongst them was a message we received from Gringotts, claiming that you demanded a goblin maiden or you'd make the Wizengamot declare war on them. Madam Malkin says you molested her and both her shop girls, and we even have a complaint from the muggle Prime Minister, who says that you flashed the Queen and were seen by millions because it was on muggle television! I saw the instant replay, with microscopic closeup! It was you!"

"Microscopic closeup?" Seamus asked, then shuddered. "If Madam Bones saw the closeup and was sure it was Dumbledore, wouldn't that mean that she'd seen his -"

"Don't!" Hermione cried as she put her hands to her ears. "I don't want hear this!"

The Gryffindors looked ill as they stared between the Headmaster and the Head of the DMLE.

"Pervert!" yelled a voice from the Ravenclaw table. The Hufflepuff table growled in anger and even Professor Sprout looked as though she'd like to introduce the Headmaster to her trowel.

"I never did any such thing!" protested Dumbledore.

"Dawlish," snapped Fudge.

The auror stepped forward, holding a pair of magic suppressing manacles.

"Fawkes!" shouted Dumbledore.

A bright ball of flame appeared over the head table, only to be met by a pink beam from the Gryffindor table. Fawkes materialized, squawked a few times, then grabbed hold of Professor Snape and vanished.

"I knew it would work!" Hermione exclaimed.

"What? Hermione? What did you do?" Harry demanded.

Noting that everyone was staring at her, she shrugged. "He escaped the aurors last year because of his Phoenix. Really, he has no faith in our criminal justice system. I mean, it's not like someone would prevent him from having a fair trial," she replied with a straight face.

Many in the room began to snicker, though the official types began to look uncomfortable.

"Anyway," she continued, "I wondered how you could prevent a Phoenix from aiding an escaping criminal and so I tried a Confundus charm."

"Well done, Miss Granger!" called the Minister. By now, Dawlish had slapped the manacles on Dumbledore, who was still staring at Hermione in shock. "Your quick actions have helped us greatly and I intend to put you in for a Order of Merlin." He paused, staring at her considering. "Fourth Class, Junior edition," he added finally.

"Wait!" shouted Dumbledore when Dawlish started to pull on his chains. "Harry, I know you're behind this somehow. Tell them the truth!"

Harry looked at the Headmaster. "Me? I'm too busy exploring origami aliens, Headmaster. I don't have any time to get involved in your troubles. I've got enough of my own. Do you know how difficult origami is?"

"Harry," Dumbledore whined.

Harry stood and shook his head. "I understand. I really do. You've finally been caught and now the world will know of your crimes. I will pray for you, Headmaster. In fact, we will all pray for you." He paused and looked around the room, then nodded in satisfaction as many people bowed their heads. "Oh, mighty Ommonoka, king of the Origama Llamas," he said, throwing his arms wide, "have mercy on this poor, wretched pervert. Teach him the error of his ways so that he may once more be a just and righteous man. Cure him of his pedophilia, his unwholesome interest in bestiality and his nasty addiction to pinching women's nipples! In your name, we pray. Amen!"

As he finished his prayer, he noted that Madam Bones had been taking notes, and nearly laughed out loud. It seemed as though the woman might have many more questions for the troubled Headmaster than she had originally thought.

For the second time that morning, Harry climbed up on the table and began to shuffle his feet and chant. A few moments later, Luna climbed on top of the Ravenclaw table and began to copy his movements. Then the Patil twins, Lavender and Seamus joined in.

A minute or so later, everyone except the first years and the Slytherins were dancing on the tables.

"What are we dancing for this time, mate?" asked Neville.

Harry glanced at the ceiling. "Snow," he said firmly. "It's too late in the season for rain."

McGonagall blanched and looked at the ceiling when the skies began to darken.

As Dumbledore was led from the hall, he passed Harry, who was shuffling with Lavender.

He bent down and grinned at the old man. "I did warn you, if you'll remember. You should have expelled me," he said, before turning back to his dance partner.

Once lunch was over, the trio left the Great Hall and headed for their common room. Harry hadn't managed to make it snow in the Hall, but it was a tad foggy, much to McGonagall's annoyance.

"Harry!"

The three friends stopped and turned around to watch Tonks walk toward them.

"What can I do for you, Auror Tonks?" Harry asked politely.

She looked startled for a moment, then laughed nervously. "Sorry, I forgot about the uniform. This isn't anything official. I just wanted to speak with you for a moment." She glanced at Ron and Hermione. "Alone, if that's all right with you."

He shrugged. "All right." He took several steps away from his friends and waited for Tonks to join him. Once she had, he cast a privacy charm and looked at her curiously. "What's up?"

"It's about Remus," she began.

"Is he okay?" Harry asked, concerned.

"No. I mean, yes, he's fine. It's just -" she paused, then blew out a frustrated breath. "Look, I have feelings for Remus, and we were beginning to grow close, until you pulled your little stunt at Headquarters this past summer. Since then, he's been cold and distant toward me and I don't understand why!"

"Are you still a member of the Order?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes. "He asked me the same question after he saw you off on the Express. The answer is yes, though I don't see what that has to do with anything!"

Harry pointed a finger at her. "And that, if I had to guess, is exactly why he's being cold toward you."

"What does my being a member of the Order have to do with this?" she asked, frustrated.

He looked at her for a moment, incredulous. "You're serious, aren't you? You really can't see it." He shook his head. "I don't have time to explain everything now, so I'll make this short. Disregarding

everything he's done to me, everything he did to Sirius, leaves just one issue for you to think about."

He tilted his head and looked into her eyes. "You're an auror. You took an oath. Do you believe in that oath?"

Her back stiffened and she glared at him. "Yes, of course I do."

"And what are your thoughts when you try to arrest someone for breaking a law, and they resist or try to escape?"

She scowled. "That they're guilty, though that's ultimately for a court to decide."

He nodded. "So explain to me why Dumbledore tried to escape this afternoon when he was placed under arrest. Are those the actions of an innocent man?"

She gaped at him. "You don't honestly think that Dumbledore is guilty, do you?"

He stared at her for a moment, then shook his head. "You, Auror Tonks, are a lost cause, and I think that's what Remus sees when he looks at you," he told her softly. "Whatever your feelings are for him, my guess is he'll never return them until you wake up to what's really going on in the world around you. And maybe not even then."

With a flick of his wand, he dropped the privacy charm and walked back to his friends, leaving her to stare after him, confused and feeling very much alone.

Hogwarts, November 15th, afternoon...

Albus Dumbledore trudged up the road to Hogwarts, disheveled and twitching slightly. He'd been released from Ministry custody an hour ago, but had yet to recover from his treatment.

He'd been locked in a holding cell for what felt like weeks. He'd been given food and water, but hadn't seen or spoken to anyone until they'd dragged him out his cell several hours ago. They'd stripped him, hosed him down with water, tossed him a robe and forced him to sit in an uncomfortable wooden chair with a light shining in his eyes. When he'd demanded to be released, the chair had sent a

painful shock though his body. The action was repeated when he'd demanded to see Amelia Bones.

He quickly learned to keep his mouth shut and speak only when spoken too.

When the interrogation was over, he'd been yanked to his feet by unseen hands and a magical body cavity search had been performed on his person. The idea had always intrigued him, he admitted to himself, but only so far as being the one to perform the search, not the one subject to it! The memory made his sphincter spasm and he moaned, mostly in protest.

He entered the school and stopped for a moment, listening. Hearing only the voices and laughter of the students, he turned and made his way to his office, feeling every one of his many years weighing him down.

When he reached his office, he pushed the door open to find Minerva seated behind his desk, spinning in his chair and loudly humming Scotland the Brave.

He cleared his throat noisily, but she didn't seem to notice. "Minerva?" he called.

She slowly spun to a stop, facing away from the Headmaster, but used her feet to turn the chair around. "You're back?" she asked, scowling at him.

"Of course, I'm back!" he snapped. "I am the Headmaster of this school!"

Minerva stood up, placed her hands on the desk in front of her and leaned toward him. Her eyes burned in anger and her lips were curled back in a snarl. "No, you're a tease, Albus!" she accused.

"Excuse me?" he asked, confused and a little alarmed by her countenance.

"Do you know how many times I've nearly been named Headmistress of this school? When Fudge and his bumbling idiots took you into custody this time, I thought I finally had my chance. I was so close!"

He shook his head dumbly. "I'm – I'm sorry, Minerva." He tilted his head slightly and wonder if he'd really just apologized for keeping his job.

She pushed away from the desk and tripped over the chair behind her. Catching her balance, she turned to the chair and smiled. "Pardon me. I hope I didn't hurt you." She scooted by the chair, patting it lightly on the armrest. Turning to the door, she took a few steps, then stared at Dumbledore. "You're back?" she asked, acting as if she'd just noticed him.

"Minerva? Are you unwell?" he asked, taking a step toward her.

"Unwell? No, no," she protested, waving a hand about airily, only to become distracted its movement.

"Perhaps you should -" Dumbledore began, only to be interrupted by a clock chiming on the mantle.

Minerva spun to face the clock, then clapped gleefully. "Staff meeting time!" she crowed. She turned back to Dumbledore and smiled. "Would you like to come?" she asked shyly. "We're having brownies. I'm being naughty, of course. I just had a plateful, but they're so delicious!"

Albus rubbed his temples tiredly. "No, I think I'll leave it in your capable hands, my dear. I'll be sure to attend the next one."

"Excellent! We'll see you tomorrow, then!"

"Tomorrow?" he asked before she could exit the office. "If there's a staff meeting today, why would there be another tomorrow?"

"We have staff meetings every day, Albus! After all, it's not as though we teachers have anything else to do this year," she told him cheerfully. Waving happily, she skipped out of the office and closed the door behind her.

Moving to his desk, he sat down and stared at the door. What has gotten into her? he wondered. First the students, then that business with the Prophet interview, then the Ministry's treatment – He shuddered. No, no. Best not to think about that.

He glanced around his office once. "A hot bath," he murmured. "Yes. A bath and a nice nap, I think."

Standing, he noticed Minerva's brownie plate, with one treat left. He stared at the sweet for a moment, then shrugged and picked it up. Making his way to the door of his private quarters, he bit into the brownie and nearly moaned. She was right, he thought. It's delicious.

Staff Lounge, the next day...

Albus smiled to himself and popped another lemon drop into his mouth, before stepping into the room. He'd always claimed the lemon drops were calming, but this particular batch was extra mellow. He made a mental note to thank the second year who'd bought him the large tin of his favorite treat.

His grin broadened when he saw his staff clustered around a side table, helping themselves to tea and what looked like a large platter of brownies.

He looked around the room, nodding at the other professors. He was glad the staff had calmed down and now believed that he hadn't been responsible for what the Ministry had accused him of.

"Albus, you must try one of these," Professor Sprout said, waving a brownie in each hand.

He wondered if they were the same recipe as the one he'd tried yesterday. "I do believe I will," he murmured, walking over to the table.

Hufflepuff Common Room...

"Are those the same brownies that Hermione came up with?" asked Ernie McMillan.

The whole house was gathered in the common room, watching the staff meeting being projected on one wall.

Susan Bones looked up from the bag of popcorn she held and shook her head. "No, these are slightly different. She wanted to make sure that Hagrid wouldn't have any problems with these, so

she modified the recipe." She shook a generous amount of popcorn into the small bowl in her lap. Passing the huge bag of popcorn to Hannah, she grinned. "Remember, the old recipe had an adverse side-effect on Hagrid."

"So that's why they moved the Staff Lounge and bricked up the entrance to the old one?" asked Hannah.

"I heard they couldn't get rid of the smell," added Ernie. "I also heard that they tried to exorcise the room. Why, I'm not sure, but it didn't work, for obvious reasons."

"They should have tried Harry's suggestion," murmured a third year. "I mean, a switching spell to move the stink down to Snape's quarters is perfect. But then, he's brilliant anyway, isn't he? And those eyes," she said with a sigh and a slightly starry look in her eyes.

Hannah and Susan exchanged a knowing glance. The third year wasn't the only girl in the school seriously crushing on Harry's bad boy image this year. He hadn't shown an interest in any particular girl yet, but that only aggravated the situation.

Silence fell in both the staff room and the common room as the teachers took their positions around the table.

Authors Notes:

To the reviewer who mentioned the song that never ends – did you peek? ~Grin~ I couldn't help but laugh when I read that, since I knew what was coming. Same with the reviewer who called the fumigation. Ya'll are good!

Thanks for the reviews, everyone. While they're not required, it's nice to know I can make you laugh! For those who haven't reviewed, you certainly don't have to. But I hope you're enjoying this little tale.

~ Bob's Note

Thought Provoking Thought for the day.

Never attack an elite 5 levels above you if you're alone. No one can hear you scream.

Alyx's Quote. "Does this Elekk make my butt look fat?"

Disclaimer:

Bob opened the office door, then stopped. "Who turned out the lights?"

"Shh!" Alyx said from some distance. "It's about to start. Close the door and get down here!"

Stepping into the room, Bob closed the door, then took two steps and stopped. "Where are you? And why is it so damn dark?"

"Honestly, Bob, what am I going to do with you?" Alyx asked, then sighed.

"I've got several ideas," he told her lasciviously.

"Later, dear. We have a disclaimer to get to. And you need to get down here," she said. "Hang on a second."

There was small clicking sound, then small, dim lights appeared on the floor.

"A theater?" Bob asked.

"Yes, now get down here and hush.!"

Bob hurried down the aisle, stopping only when he heard his wife hiss at him. Sliding in next to her, he sat down and sighed. "Give a guy a bit of a warning next time, would you?"

"I'll think about it," she said, then sat up straight when a spotlight appeared on the stage. "Oh, it's about to begin!"

"What is?"

"The disclaimer. That's why were here, after all."

"What did you cook up this time?"

"Oh it's...Wait! It's starting!"

Into the spotlight stepped a three year old Hermione Granger. She held a giant, eight inch lollipop in front of her. When she turned to face the audience, she lowered the treat so she could peek over it.

"Alwx an Bob don own Hawey Potta," she lisped cutely, then giggled.

Alyx stood up and cheered loudly, clapping her hands with enthusiasm.

Bob stood up more slowly. He clapped, but stared at the lollipop oddly.

"What do you call that?" he asked.

"You remember your "Quick and dirty" disclaimer? Well, this is my "Short and sweet," she gushed.

"How much did this cost us, honey? We used the last of the budget on the parade."

She shrugged. "We'll be paying it off for a few years."

He blinked. "For a disclaimer?"

"Do I need to remind you of the technicolor penguins?" she asked in a huff as she slipped past him and headed for the door. "Let's go."

Nearly to the exit, she heard Bob's voice behind her. Turning, she saw him up on stage taking to Hermione. Frowning, she moved back down the aisle to hear him better.

"But you have to give it back! We can't return the use of the theater, but I bet I could get a few bucks for that lollipop! Come on, kid, give a guy a break!"

Hermione hugged the sweet closer, then kicked Bob in the shins and ran off stage yelling, "My lolly!"

Watching her husband hop around on stage in obvious pain, Alyx snickered, then turned to the readers. "Enjoy the final chapter of Saying No, everyone!"

Staff Room...

Dumbledore swallowed a mouthful of brownie and smiled at his teachers. "I would like to thank you all for your support these past few weeks. I know it's been a difficult time for all. Minerva, would you start off by reading off the current point assignments?"

Minerva blinked in surprise, unaware that they'd actually be conducting school business at the meeting. She rummaged around her robe pockets for a few moments, before giving up and waving her wand in front of her. The scores appeared before them all, glowing brightly.

She cleared her throat roughly. "As everyone can see, Slytherin House has six points, mostly awarded for being brave enough to leave their common room.

"Hufflepuff house has a negative seventeen thousand, five hundred and seventy seven points."

Ponoma moaned and lowered her head to the table. "I'm so ashamed," she said. "I can never show my face in the greenhouse again!"

Minerva glanced at her sympathetically, then continued to read. "Ravenclaw House has a negative twelve thousand, eight hundred and ninety one points."

Filius Flitwick growled in the back of his throat and his hands clenched reflexively.

"Gryffindor House," Minerva said, her voice shaking, "has a negative two hundred and eighty seven thousand, five hundred and sixty one points." She whimpered, then buried her head in her hands. It was all that Potter boy's fault! she thought to herself. His father was never so disobedient and his mother was a dream student. Where did this bad streak come from?

"We're winning," Snape said smugly. His eyes gazed lovingly at the numbers before him. "We're actually winning!"

"It's just not fair!" wailed Sprout suddenly. "The students don't care about points and they refuse detentions. This used to be a good school, a refined school."

"That's right," murmured a tearful McGonagall. "We even managed to avoid too much frivolity!"

"Yeah, except when it was your Weasleys," sneered Snape.

"They weren't my fault! Albus wouldn't let me spank them like I wanted to do!" hissed Minerva. "Spanking worked for their father. Why wouldn't it work for them?"

"I remember finding Molly and Arthur one evening in their last year," Dumbledore said fondly as he doodled on a piece of parchment in front of him. "Arthur was busy spanking Molly -"

"It's worse than that," Filius interrupted quickly. He didn't want Albus to talk about that incident, or it might lead to how the Headmaster had found him with the head girl later that same night. "They don't need us!" he exclaimed angrily.

Dumbledore looked up from his doodles of kittens and bunnies. He reached over and plucked the brownie from Minerva's hand and took a bite. "Oh? How so, Filius?" He asked, doing his best Ron Weasley impression.

Minerva stared at Albus with narrow eyes. She hissed at him softly, then summoned more brownies to her plate. With a flick of her wand, she placed an electrocution ward on her pastries. Let him steal one now, she thought grumpily.

"They've been studying," Filius said. "I've been watching them. In fact, I found that a group of six years had brewed a levitation potion and were using it for their own amusement. Not only had they brewed the potion, but they had improved -" He gasped suddenly and looked around, alarmed. "Wait! Did you feel that? I'm sure I felt something!"

As the staff froze, trying to feel what Filius had felt, they heard the diminutive professor giggle, then watched as he slid sideways off his chair.

"I told you I felt something," he called from the floor a moment later.

"I knew he was going to do that." proclaimed Trelawney smugly.

"Sure yeh did,"muttered Hagrid. He sat in a corner, calmly munching on a fist full of brownies. At least these didn't give him gas like the previous batch had.

"I felt something also," said Professor Harris, the muggle studies teacher. "A disturbance in the force," he added solemnly.

"Impossible!" protested Snape. "Those dunderheads couldn't p-p-possibly improve on a p-p-potion that has been around for two hundred years! That p-p-potion is p-p-perfect!" His expression softened. "It's exquisite and sublime, and arousing in its simplicity and p-p-erfection," he finished, nearly crooning to himself.

Dumbledore reached out calmly and grabbed Snape by the nose. He then yanked downward, hard, causing Snape's head to hit the table with a thunderous crack.

Snape slowly lifted his head and looked around groggily. "Mummy, why are the stars so bright?" he asked in a high pitched voice.

"I always wanted to do that," Dumbledore said, smiling. He then turned to Snape. "Now, Severus, I won't put up with you bad mouthing our students. Just because you're a failure as a teacher, there's no excuse to call them names."

When Snape began to sputter indignantly, Hagrid leaned around Ponomarev and slapped the back of Snape's head.

After another thunderous crack, Snape raised his wobbly head. "Is it time for bed, Mummy?" he asked, then slid to the floor and began to snore.

"Yer right, Professor. That was fun!" Hagrid said to Dumbledore.

"I know, dear boy. I do hope Poppy has some headache potion for after the meeting," he replied.

"For Severus?" asked Minerva.

Dumbledore chuckled. "No, no, for me. I fear Severus will be most put out with us, but it was for the greater good, you see."

Poppy shook her head. "Potions? We ran out of those weeks ago, Albus. We've been so busy with -" She paused. "Well, we've been busy. I'll see about ordering some in."

At the far end of the table, a nearly naked Professor Vector danced slowly around Professor Trelawny, who was nibbling on a brownie and watching the show with great interest.

Dumbledore knocked on the table several times and finally managed to draw the attention of the staff. He raised a finger and stopped suddenly, transfixed by the sight of the digit.

"Albus?" asked Minerva. "What's wrong?"

"My finger glows," he replied in awe. "I am more powerful than Merlin. He couldn't make his finger glow. And look, it's such a lovely shade of pink."

"I had pink poop once!" offered Ponomasova.

Minerva turned to eye her fellow teacher. "The twins got you too, eh? Mine was green and sang the school song! Blasted redhead menaces."

Ponomasova turned to stare at Minerva and wondered if she should inform the Deputy Headmistress that she had vines growing out of her ears.

Dumbledore waved his glowing finger and sparks shot out from the tip.

Everyone turned to stare in amazement at the Headmaster's spark shooting finger.

"Now that I have your attention," Dumbledore said, standing and swaying ominously.

Poppy watched, slowly chewing a bite of her fourth brownie. She was confused. As a trained healer she could recognize the signs of being under the influence of a potion and she knew without a doubt that she was under such an influence. Strangely, she couldn't muster enough will to care about it. Nor did she care that Albus' finger was on fire. If he wasn't screaming about it, she wasn't going

to worry about it. She hated when they screamed. It always gave her a headache.

"I want to talk about Harry Potter," Albus said. "Cute, cuddly, adorable Harry Potter."

"Headmaster, you know the Minister ordered you to stay away from Harry Potter," Minerva said seriously, then she turned to Aurora Sinistra. "How far away did he have to stay, Aurora?"

"Four point two light years," the Astronomy Professor said, her voice firm, her eyes glassy.

Minerva turned back to Dumbledore. "That's right, Albie. You have stay away from – Um, who were we talking about?"

"Ron Weaseldick," offered Hagrid.

She turned and looked at Hagrid in consternation.

"I didn't think anyone else knew about that," Pomona said.

"His brothers passed around some photos they took last year while he was in the shower," replied Minerva. "I was appalled by the obviously doctored photo."

She didn't tell the others that she hadn't added the photo to her collection of Gryffindor willie photos she'd been collecting over the years. She didn't want fakes!

"No, no, no! I want to talk about Harry Potter!" Dumbledore shouted. He leapt to his feet and thrust his hips forward. He looked down at his pelvis, confused, then suddenly grinned. "Well, look who finally woke up!" He patted his crotch proudly. "Soon, my lovely. First the Professors and I must finish our meeting," he crooned.

Looking up, he smiled at the staff. "Now, who were we talking about again?"

The room was suddenly plunged into darkness and a hush fell among the teachers. If they'd known to listen for it, they may have been able to hear the sound of unrestrained laughter coming from three houses.

"That's not funny," muttered Hagrid.

"I'll fix it!" shouted Flitwick. In the darkness it was impossible to tell just where he was.

"Who just pinched my nipple?" exclaimed Minerva. "Albus?"

"Wasn't me, my dear," replied the aging Headmaster.

Flitwick started a chant in what had to be high Latin. It was lengthy, involved and, unfortunately for him and everyone else, punctuated by hiccups. He finished his incantation with a short stabbing motion that no one saw, but Trelawney felt.

Crying out in pain, she slapped a hand over one eye. She settled into a stoned whimper as the faces of the faculty began to glow. Not a pure white, or even a pleasant yellow. No, they glowed in a rotating barber pole pattern.

"Well, that's different," Albus exclaimed brightly. "Filius, you simply must teach me this spell, I have a robe that would go marvelously with these colors."

Hufflepuff Common Room...

Hannah reached over and grabbed a handful of popcorn from Susan's bowl and chuckled along with the rest of her housemates. Then she noticed Susan tapping her wand on a small parchment which contained a map of the school.

"You didn't!" she exclaimed.

Susan looked up and grinned unashamedly. "Hermione gave it to me. With this map I can turn out lights, cause toilets to backup, freeze the staircases - just about anything, really."

"And you turned off the lights on them?"

Susan nodded. "Watch this," she said, then muttered something over the parchment. The image on the wall slewed wildly for a moment, then it steadied, showing a dimly lit corridor and a closed door.

When everyone turned to look at her, she shrugged. "What? It's just outside the staff lounge. What did you expect? It's dark in there."

The Hufflepuff's settled down when the door started to open, then stopped. Laughter and whispers could be heard from behind the door.

"Watch where you're putting your hands," said a voice that sounded like a very groggy Snape.

"Excuse me, dear boy," replied Albus Dumbledore. "It slipped. I didn't mean anything, unless you'd like it to."

More peals of laughter were heard in the dark staff room.

"Who's that?" asked Hannah. She pointed at a small figure standing at the end of the corridor.

Ernie McMillan leaned forward and squinted slightly. "Isn't that Tracy Donovan? She's a first year Slytherin."

Before anyone could answer, the door to the staff room was flung open with a loud crash and several glowing teachers spilled out into the corridor, laughing loudly.

Professor Sprout was holding onto the hem of her skirt and was fluffing it up over her head, then down again. "Breezy," she moaned.

Tracy stared at the glowing teachers, then screeched piercingly before turning and bolting in the opposite direction.

"Oh, that's going to be a problem," muttered Ernie.

Susan turned to look at him. "Why?"

"Tracy's dad is the director of news services at the Wizarding Wireless network. By this time tomorrow her father will know about this," he replied.

Hannah grabbed another mouthful of popcorn and nodded. "Maybe that's a good thing," she said.

On the wall, they all watched Dumbledore as he tried to climb on top of Hagrid's shoulders. He was shouting a challenge to all the Professors, claiming that he and his pony could beat them all to Hogsmeade.

Gryffindor Common room, November 30th, early evening...

All of Gryffindor was packed into the common room in a scene being played out in two other House common rooms. The only sounds were the crackle of the fire and the breathing of the students as they watched the images on the wall, shocked into silence.

Seamus turned slowly from the images on the wall and stared at Harry for a moment. "Was that supposed to happen?" he asked, his voice strangely high pitched.

Harry blinked slowly. "Um, no?"

"You mean you don't know?" Lavender blurted.

"It's not like I expected him to actually find a unicorn!" Harry protested. "And let's be honest, even if he had, who here thought one would actually allow Snape to touch it? And even if someone was foolish enough to believe he'd find one and touch it, who in their right mind could have imagined what just happened?"

"Luna," Ginny said quietly, her eyes still on the image of Snape, who was busy trying to fix his shredded robes enough to cover himself.

"What?"

She glared around the room. "You don't all have to shout. I'm not deaf. Well, I wasn't."

When people started shouting questions at her, Harry bellowed for silence.

He stared at Ginny once the room was silent. "Let me see if I understand you correctly. Luna said that Snape would find a unicorn, walk up to it and touch it?"

Ginny nodded.

"And after having touched the unicorn, she said it would turn on Snape, beat the hell out of him, knock him off his feet and...er..." He paused and looked about helplessly.

"Molest him?" Hermione offered as she reached for the popcorn, never taking her eyes off the wall.

"So, is he still considered a virgin?" Parvati asked curiously, then ducked as people tossed popcorn at her.

As the groans and retching sounds died down, Harry looked at Ginny and quirked an eyebrow. "Well? Luna predicted this?"

"Well," Ginny hedged, "I don't know that I'd call it a prediction. I think it was more of a joke. Maybe." She sighed then. "Either way, I owe her two Sickles."

He shook his head for a moment, then turned to Hermione. "Do you think we should ask Luna..."

"No," she interrupted, still staring at the wall. "If you do, you should know two things. There won't be a "we" in that scenario and the explanation will only give you a headache."

"But maybe..."

"What is that?" she interrupted again, leaning forward and squinting.

Turning, Harry stared at the wall, puzzled. "What? It's just Snape. Looks like he finally made it back to the entrance hall. Pretty fast for a man who crawled the whole way."

"No, I think she's talking about that thing on the left, Harry, at the bottom of the image," Ron said as he tilted his head from one side to the other. "Whatever it is, it's moving."

"It looks like a bit of rope," Harry muttered, leaning forward so far he nearly fell off the couch.

"That's no rope," Dean said. "It looks more like a..."

Several screams drown out whatever Dean said as a tentacle shot out and wrapped around Snape. The man's scream echoed off the castle's walls.

"What is it? The camera's angled all wrong!" Lavender shrieked.

"Quick way to find out!" Harry shouted over the noise in the common room as he jumped to his feet and bolted for the door.

Ron, Hermione and Ginny were a few steps behind him. The rest of the Gryffindors followed, though there was a bit of a jam at the door as they all tried to rush out together.

Reaching the entrance hall, Harry skidded to a stop, panting. As he realized what he was seeing, he blanched and turned away as Ron, Hermione and Ginny arrived.

Hermione shook her head and clutched at her stomach. "I shouldn't have eaten all that popcorn," she murmured.

The thunder of many feet bounced off the walls and students from Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Gryffindor began to arrive.

When the shrieks, moans, sobs and retching sounds ended, the hall was silent as everyone stared at the sight before them.

"What...what..." Ron murmured again and again, unsure of just what he was seeing.

"I think it broke him," Ginny said, poking her brother several times.

"Merlin, look at the mess!" Lee blurted. "I'm telling you now, I'm not cleaning that up."

"Lee!" several people shouted.

"What? Are you telling me there's someone here who actually liked the bastard?"

"Well, no," Susan said with a shrug. "But to go like that?"

Harry turned back to the mess on the floor, ignoring the questions and comments from his fellow students, as he tried to process what he was seeing.

The body of the thing was covered in bright green fuzz. It looked almost like a huge, out of control Chia Pet. Well, if Chia Pets had tentacles. Lots of tentacles.

He took a few steps closer. Each tentacle he could see, and he could see a lot of them, had an eye at the tip. His imagination began to play tricks on him and he nearly crawled out of his skin before he realized that, no, they weren't all staring at him.

His eyes moved to the creature's mouth and he shuddered. Saliva still dripped from the maw of the thing, soaking the sleeve of what was left of Snape's robe. And while that in itself was disturbing, it was the fact that Snape's arm was still in said sleeve, hand curled into a claw, that nearly caused him to vomit.

"The Bundimun," he murmured to himself. "Kreacher's going to be pissed."

A loud pop, quickly followed by a strong, foul smelling breeze rushed through the hall, caused the students to cough and back up quickly. As they watched, the creature seemed to melt, exposing the chewed, beaten and mostly naked body of Hogwart's Potion professor.

What was left of the creature was a very large puddle of greenish soup, with many eyes.

"Now what?" someone asked quietly.

"Colin?" Susan called.

"Way ahead of you," Colin answered, holding up his camera.

She then looked at Harry. "I'm not sure what all you have planned, but I think I should owl my aunt about this," she told him, pointing at the mess on the floor.

"Yeah, mate" Dean said. "I'm all for disrupting things and causing a bit of chaos, but we're not equipped to deal with, well, this!"

Harry looked at Ron and Hermione, an eyebrow raised in question.

Ron shrugged. "It's your show."

Hermione nodded.

"Send the owl, Susan," Harry said quietly, then looked around. "The rest of you should probably head back to your common rooms." As the students began to file out, he spoke quietly with Susan for a few moments before rejoining his friends.

"I asked her to wait until early tomorrow morning to send the owl. I need to remove the spells from Snape. Oh, and Ron? Use Hedwig to send a note to your brothers. Tell them to send it. Tonight."

Ron's eyes narrowed. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

Ron flashed a feral grin, then spun on his heel and jogged away.

Hermione's eyes narrowed as she watch Ron for a moment, then she turned to Harry. "Do I want to know what that's all about?"

He rolled his eyes. "You're Hermione Granger. Of course you want to know!" He smiled at her then. "But I'm not going to tell you." He ducked away as she took a playful swat at his head.

"God, but you're a prat sometimes!" she huffed. "So, now what?"

"A bit of wand work," he told her as he drew his wand and began to remove all traces of his spell work from Snape's body.

Returning to the common room, Hermione and Harry found their housemates still up and discussing the night's events.

Sighing, Harry said goodnight to Hermione, then moved through the room, stopping to talk to Dean, Seamus and Neville for a few moments.

Pushing open the door to the dorm, he saw Ron opening the window a bit.

Seeing Harry enter, Ron explained that he was leaving the window open for Hedwig. "I'm not sure if they'll send a reply, but I figured this would make it easier."

Harry grinned. "I was thinking the same thing. I warned the guys that the window would be open."

Once he'd changed, he climbed into bed, then called Kreacher.

The elf appeared, standing at the end of the bed. "Master called?"

Harry nodded. "I have a bit of bad news. At least, I think it's bad." He thought about that for a moment, then shrugged. "The creature created by your potions is dead." He then spent the next several minutes explaining what happened.

Harry looked at Kreacher intently. "I thought it was warded?"

The elf frowned, then shrugged. "I said I warded it, I never said it was a permanent ward, besides its not really dead. It just reverted to its original state. It's nothing more than a fungus now."

"A fungus with eyes. Lots of eyes."

He grinned. "So, it's a very creepy fungus. Besides, all Kreacher has to do is feed it potions again and..." he cackled and danced out of Harry's reach as the young man tried to grab him.

"Don't you dare! That's an order, Kreacher!"

Sighing, the elf nodded. "Kreacher knows."

Dismissing the elf, Harry stretched hard, then fell back against his pillow. It had been a long evening. That night his nightmare consisted of an angry Hermione with tentacles for hair.

Grimmauld Place, later that night...

George's head hit the table with a resounding thud and Fred sighed.

"Wake up, Gred. If you keep banging your head against the table when you fall asleep, what's left of your brain is going to dribble out your ears."

George jerked upright. "Corncobs," he said authoritatively.

"Not just now," Fred muttered as he flipped through the pile of notes in front of him.

Shaking his head, George scrubbed his face with his hands. "I dreamed that I was cleaning my ears with talking corncobs. They kept offering suggestions on wax removal."

"Try a crowbar and a blow torch."

A sweet, childish voice drifted down to the library and George sighed. Seeing the pained expression on his brother's face, he smiled crookedly. "Well, look at it this way. At least he doesn't hiss and spit anymore."

"A minor improvement, brother." Scowling, Fred glared at the ceiling. "The silencing charm has obviously worn off. It's your turn."

"Oh, come on! I've done it the last six times," George grouched.

"Yeah, well, it was your idea to charm the thing to play that song repeatedly. Silencing charm, tape, an old sock or a ball gag. I don't care which one you use, just shut him up!"

Taking out his wand, George shook his head. "I think you're failing to see the humor in this situation, my dear Forge." With a few flicks of his wand, he applied the silencing charm on the room. "There. That way I don't have to keep going upstairs," he muttered, tucking his wand away.

"You're right. I'm not seeing the humor in this."

George contorted his body in such a way that he made himself look smaller. Widening his eyes and batting his lashes at his brother, he twirled around on his toes. "But don't you see?" he asked in a high, squeaky voice. "What could be more amusing than the most feared Dark Lord of our time, believing himself to be a Tom Marvolo Albus Percival Riddle Dumbledore, the six year old, bastard great grandson of our most wonderful Headmaster? Why, listen to how happy he is, singing his favorite song!" Taking a deep breath, he

leaned down toward Fred and began to sing. "I love you. You love me..."

"Oy! Shut it! God, that song's been stuck in my head for weeks now!"

Laughing, George sat down and pulled a pile of papers out of the stacks. "Right. So, have you found anything?"

"Lots. Just nothing very helpful," Fred told him, disgusted.

A small pop was heard in the room as Kreacher appeared with a tea tray. "Kreacher thinks the two red headed menaces believe he doesn't have enough to do. There is no other reason for this latest disaster. Kreacher has had to tether Master Harry's house guest to his trunk to keep him from knocking things over!

The elf made his way toward the table, glaring at the twins. "What ever made you think doing that to Voldemort's ears would be a good thing?"

"It wasn't intentional," George said, scowling. "And we are working to fix it!"

"Work faster!" Kreacher exclaimed furiously. "And to think, Master told Kreacher that you two were funny!"

Slamming the tray down on the table, the elf straightened and his face suddenly cleared of anger. "Tea?" he asked politely.

"Um, thank you, Kreacher," Fred said sheepishly.

Another small pop was heard and Dobby appeared, arms crossed and leaning against the far wall. "The House of Potter never has problems like this. Dobby thinks the Potter head elf must be better than..."

"You little..." Kreacher began as he sprang toward Dobby.

George grabbed Kreacher's arm to halt his attack on Dobby as Fred glared at both elves.

"Do you want me to report this to Harry?" Fred asked angrily. "You know his orders!"

Both elves went ridged.

"No, Mister Fred," Dobby replied meekly.

"Kreacher and Dobby won't fight," Kreacher said quietly, then scowled. "All right. We will fight. But we won't harm each other or anyone else."

"Was there a reason you joined us, Dobby?" George asked as he released Kreacher.

The elf nodded. "Master Harry's owl delivered this," he said, walking toward George, holding up a small note. "Hedwig waits in the kitchen, so Dobby thinks a reply is needed."

Taking the note, George read through it quickly, then quirked an eyebrow. "You know, it's times like this that I really miss being at Hogwarts," he told his brother as he passed him the note.

Looking up from the note, Fred shook his head. "What do you think he's planning to do with it?"

"I've no idea, but I wish I could be there to watch."

Gryffindor boys dorm, obscenely early in the morning...

Grumbling, Harry swatted at his ear. "Go 'way," he mumbled. He groaned and batted at his ear again. "There's food in the owlery, Hedwig. Hedwig!"

He sat up suddenly, then apologized to the owl as she clapped her beak at him in annoyance. "Sorry, girl, it was a late night. Did you bring it?"

She held out her leg and stared at him expectantly.

He took it from her, then stroked her softly. "Thanks, Hedwig."

She ruffled her feathers, nipped at his fingers, then flew out the window.

He unwrapped the small package carefully. Seeing the note the twins had included, he unfolded it and read quickly.

"You nitwits! That's all we need, a mobile torso. Like he wasn't freaky enough before?" he muttered as he climbed out of bed.

Glancing around the room, he noted that the curtains were closed on the other beds. Sliding his feet into his trainers and dropping the note on his bed, he left the room quietly and went down the steps to the common room.

Stopping at the bottom, he blinked in surprise. "What are you two doing up?" he asked.

Hermione looked up from the book she was reading and smiled. "You wouldn't tell me what you were up to, so I figured I'd find out myself."

Ron's yawn was so large, his jaw made a popping sound. "I know what you're up to. You didn't honestly think I'd miss watching, did you?"

"You're both insane," he told them as he walked over to a table and sat down.

"Had I known insanity was infectious, I'd have requested a change of house to get away from you two," Hermione told him as she and Ron joined him.

"So, what's the plan this time, oh Master of Mayhem?" Ron asked as he all but fell into a chair.

"I figured I'd go back to the beginning. Something simple, but with the possibility of being disgusting," Harry replied.

"Did I ever tell you that I hate not knowing what we're doing?" Hermione asked. Putting her elbow on the table and her chin in her hand, she looked between her two best friends tiredly.

"I think you've mentioned it once or twice," Ron told her.

"This should give a smart girl like you a clue," Harry said as he carefully unwrapped the small piece of cloth he was holding, then placed it on the table.

She jerked back and wrinkled her nose. "Harry! What on earth is that doing here?"

He looked up at her, his eyes serious. "Ending this. None of us are safe as long as those bastards run free."

"Agreed," she said, still staring at the item on the table. "I'm just trying to figure out what you're going to do with that."

"Two things. First, I'm going to use it to achieve my goal, then I'm going to destroy it. I can't leave a trail back to me in any of this if I can help it."

"Like removing the spells from Snape?" Ron asked.

"Exactly."

Hermione massaged her temples. "All right. But what are you going to do with Snape's Dark Mar...Oh, you're not serious!" she exclaimed.

He nodded. "I'm going to use Voldemort's own leash to kill his Death Eaters. All of them."

"But how?" she asked, frustrated.

He smiled. "Watch and learn, Miss Granger!"

Cracking his knuckles, he picked up Snape's contribution to the cause and set to work. It was a difficult medium, but he'd had plenty of practice of late.

As the sun began to rise several hours later, Hermione sat staring at Harry with bloodshot eyes. She studiously ignored the thing on the table. "I think I've found the flaw in your plan."

"Mm?" he grunted, his head resting on his folded arms as he slumped over the table. A particularly loud snore from Ron had him jerking upright. "What flaw?"

She flicked her fingers toward the item on the table. "How will we know if that worked?"

"I'm not," he began, only to be cut off by another snore from Ron. Looking at the red head, he scowled when noticed the drool pooling on the table. "Ron," he said loudly, kicking him in the leg, "wake up! We have a problem."

Ron sat up suddenly. "Ginger snaps," he said, panicked.

"Ron, you were dreaming. Snap out of it," Hermione said testily.

Blinking several times, Ron then rubbed his nose and shuddered. "I was being chased around the Quidditch pitch by millions of ginger snaps and I couldn't find my broom," he mumbled.

"Then be glad we woke you up. Listen, we have a problem," Harry told him.

"And that is?" Ron asked, then yawned.

"How will we find out if Harry's little project last night actually worked?" Hermione asked.

Ron blinked, then stared at her for a few minutes. "Seriously?" He looked between her and Harry, then rolled his eyes. "Come on, you two. The Prophet isn't the only place the magical world gets it's news, you know!"

Harry laughed. "Of course! The wireless."

"Right," Hermione nodded. "So, we listen to the news broadcast on what, exactly?"

"Upstairs!" Ron exclaimed as he jumped to his feet and ran for the dorm.

Harry and Hermione followed him, arriving at the top of the stairs in time to see Ron enter the dorm.

"Guys, wake up," Ron shouted as he yanked the curtains around Dean's bed open.

"For Merlin's sake, Ron!" Dean cried as he sat up. "We just got to sleep." He looked around, confused. "At least, I think we did. What time is it?"

"Dunno," Harry said, as he stepped into the dorm and looked around. "But we need to turn on a wireless."

"Seamus has one," Neville said, then yawned as he climbed out of bed. "What's up?"

"Seamus?" Harry called as he rushed toward the young man's bed.

"Yeah, yeah, I heard." The mound of blankets moved and Seamus crawled out of them at the bottom of the bed. "This better be good," he grumbled as he reached over the end of his bed and flipped open his trunk. "Should be on the top."

Seeing the wireless, Harry grabbed it, then paused. "Um, how do I..?"

Dean plucked it out of his hands, then looked at Harry. "What are we wanting to listen to this morning?"

"News! There has to be some sort of news program, right?"

"There is," Ron said. "Mum listens to it every morning in the summer. Only, I've never actually tuned the wireless for that."

"Oh, for pity's sake," Seamus cried as he took the wireless from Dean. "Wake a guy up so we can listen to the news?" he muttered as he reached for his wand.

"What's going on, mate?" Neville asked Harry as Seamus fiddled with the device.

Harry waved the question away. "I'll explain later."

"Bloody wankers wake a guy up and expect him to...There! There's your damn news," Seamus exclaimed as a voice floated out from the wireless. "Now what's so important?"

Harry and Ron shushed him as they listened to the broadcast.

"...should continue to be clear, but cold, so bundle up, folks. Back to you, Cid!"

"Thank you, Matilda. For those of you just joining us, the top story this morning is the tragic and horrifying deaths that have taken place across the globe. In Ministries and boardrooms, private homes, hospitals, pubs and even the great hexagon of the International Confederation of Wizards, men and women of the magical world have been dying in the most gruesome fashion.

"A witness at the ICW, which was meeting in full conclave to discuss the removal of Albus Dumbledore, reported that people suddenly began to twist around, fold up, and dry out. When it was over, fully half of the attending members of the ICW were dead. It was later revealed that they all seemed to resemble origami llamas made of heavy parchment."

"Bloody hell!" Ron breathed. "It worked!"

"Wait. What's going on?" Dean asked, looking between Harry and Ron.

Harry waved him to silence.

"A spokesman for the ICW has confirmed the deaths and reported that, upon examination, each of those who died was a marked Death Eater."

"Yes!" Harry cried, pumping his fist in the air.

"Quiet!" Seamus barked.

"The Ministry of Magic, St. Mungo's hospital, the Leaky Cauldron and the Daily Prophet have all confirmed several deaths among their staff members. Azkaban prison has reported several deaths of notable prisoners."

A gasp from the doorway caused the boys to turn around.

"Oy! What are you two doing here?" Seamus asked as he grabbed a blanket and wrapped it around his waist.

Hermione grinned. "I've been here. Nice underwear, by the way. Never knew you were a fan of Batman."

"I couldn't sleep," Ginny said, eyeing Seamus with amusement. "I figured I'd go down to the kitchen for a snack, but found Blaise Zabini standing outside the common room door." She held up a piece of parchment, shuddering slightly. "He had some news."

Taking it, Harry read quickly, then looked up, his eyes wide.

"What is it?" Ron asked.

"It seems Slytherin has lost a few members," he said quietly. "According to Blaise, Malfoy, Nott, Crabbe, Goyle, Greengrass, Pucey, and Montague are all dead. From what he describes, they died the same way as the others."

"Merlin, I wonder where he got the parchment," Dean asked, staring at the note in Harry's hand.

Ron cuffed him over the head as the others in the room groaned. "That's disgusting!" He cocked his head slightly and thought for a moment. "Though it would be the first time Malfoy had ever been useful."

"Ron!" Ginny, Neville and Hermione all exclaimed.

Dean plucked the wireless out of Seamus' hand. "Come on, guys. The house will want to know about this."

Sometime later, the students made their way down to breakfast and were met by the sight of a furious looking Amelia Bones. She spoke to an auror, then dismissed him with a flick of her hand. Turning, she spoke to Susan, who stood nearby.

Susan nodded, then made her way toward the great hall. Once inside, she waited at the Gryffindor table. When Harry arrived, she sat down next to him.

"Auntie's very angry," she told him quietly. "You've heard about the deaths at the Ministry, the ICW and here at Hogwarts?"

"We were listening to the wireless this morning. We didn't know about the deaths here at school until later," Harry said.

"She was called into the Ministry very early this morning, then came here to deal with Snape and the thing that ate him." She shuddered. "That's when she found out about the deaths in Slytherin. She couldn't find any of the staff at first. But Dawlish finally tracked them down. They were in an abandoned classroom on the third floor. She wouldn't tell me what they were doing, only that drugs and nudity were involved."

Harry blanched. "I didn't need to know that."

She flashed a quick smile. "Two things, then I'll leave you to your breakfast. First, Auntie says that all the deaths reported so far are..."

"Death Eaters," Harry interrupted. "I know. The wireless reported that, too."

She nodded. "Second, Auntie says that there's every chance that the school will be closed. She's called in the board members, and Griselda Marchbanks, Head of the Wizarding Examinations Authority. They're the ones who oversee O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. testing."

"And as far as they know, we've learned next to nothing this year?" Harry asked.

"Right. And while we've done well, studying on our own and all, nothing can replace a competent teacher. So I was thinking that maybe we shouldn't tell them?"

He shrugged, then looked around the hall. "I don't care one way or the other. But it might be interesting, attending Hogwarts with real teachers."

Susan fidgeted a bit. "What about Hermione?" she said quietly.

Harry winced. "Shit! She's going to kill us."

December 10th, breakfast, Great Hall...

The Hogwarts student body sat quietly, looking up at the staff table calmly. The announcement currently being read by a member of the Hogwarts Board of Governors, a weedy looking man named Noddy Blankit, had been known for several days. The Hogwarts rumor mill had been working overtime for the last ten days and was surprisingly accurate for a change.

"And so it is with great sadness that the Board announces the closing of Hogwarts for the year. An official announcement will follow at a later date, once we have a plan in place for the school's reopening. Arrangements have been made to send you all home at Christmas. The school will reopen on September first and you shall all begin your current year once more. All staff members have been dismissed from their posts. The Board is already working on hiring new teachers, but it will take time.

"As you have all noticed, the Slytherin students have been sent home early. Witnessing the horrific deaths of so many of their housemates, not to mention the death of their Head of House, has been traumatic."

Blankit looked up then and sighed. "As you know, the Board did discuss your request. Though we understood why you made it, we felt we had no choice but to deny it."

As the students began to grumble, he held up both hands and asked them to hear him out.

Once the hall grew quiet, he cleared his throat. "The Ministry, specifically Minister Fudge and Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, asked us to reconsider. In light of what has happened here this year, we also consulted several healers at St. Mungo's. The considered opinion is that you should be allowed to go ahead with your plans, as it will bring you closure – or something like that."

"So, we can have the feast?" Ernie Macmillan asked as he stood up.

"Yes," Blankit confirmed.

Lisa Turpin stood. "And the guests we requested?"

Blankit nodded. "The invitations and arrangements have already been made. Everything is scheduled for the fifteenth."

As the hall erupted in cheers, Harry sat back and crossed his arms. "Time for the last act," he murmured.

December 15th, Hogwarts Great Hall, Dinner...

The leaving feast was well underway and the noise level in the Hall was tremendous. The press, the Board of Governors, and many Ministry officials were present, sitting at separate tables from the students. At a table off to the side sat the disgraced ex-staff of Hogwarts. Parents and siblings had also been invited, and they were seated among the house tables, chatting with their children, as well as each other.

The meal, as always, was a fine one. Many stuffed themselves to the point of groaning. Strangely, Ron Weasley wasn't among them. He was too excited to gorge himself as he usually did.

He kept glancing at Harry, who sat across from him, until the young man glared at him and told him to stop.

"Can't help it," Ron said, leaning across the table. "Come on, Harry! When does the show start?"

"Do I want to know what he's talking about?" Remus, who sat beside Harry, asked.

Harry sighed. "Doesn't matter if you want to know or not. You'll find out soon enough." Seeing Ron about to cheer, he raised his hand. "But after dinner, if you please!"

"Do you know where you're going to do it?" Hermione asked.

Harry nodded toward the raised dais where the Hogwarts staff used to sit. "They removed the table, so I figured it would give the best view."

"Yes, but," Ron began, then blinked as the dinner dishes were cleared away and dessert was served. "Oh, pudding!"

Ginny rolled her eyes.

"I have to admit, I'm rather curious about this gathering myself," Arthur Weasley said as he looked around the room. "This year hasn't exactly been Hogwarts best."

"No, it hasn't," Molly agreed, glaring around at her children.

The twins held up their hands.

"Don't look us," Fred said.

"We weren't even here," George added.

"And when has that ever stopped you two?" Bill asked, grinning.

"I have to admit, when I got the invitation to the feast, I was a bit surprised," Charlie added.

"It's too bad your parents couldn't attend, my dear," Molly said, smiling sympathetically at Hermione.

Hermione wrinkled her nose. "Oh, I think it's better this way. They wouldn't understand half of what's going on here. And explaining it would be...complicated."

"You did well enough the first time," Moody muttered around his unlit pipe. "And why am I at the Gryffindor table? I was a Hufflepuff," he groused.

Hermione looked at him with wide, innocent eyes. "Why, because we love you, of course!"

Moody flinched. "Knock it off. And answer the damn question!"

Harry grinned. "If it hadn't been for you, none of this would have happened."

"Oh, no. You're not blaming me, Potter," Moody growled. He yanked his pipe out of his mouth and pointed it Molly. "I'll not have her thinking I'm responsible for this!"

Once the dessert dishes had been cleared away, the crowd began to grow a bit restless.

Harry looked down the table at the twins. "So, where is it?"

George patted his robes for a moment, then reached into a pocket and pulled out a small item. Setting on the table, he gave it a shove.

As it slid toward Harry, those at the Gryffindor table watched, puzzled.

"What's that?" Remus asked as it passed him.

"The main event," Harry told him as he reached out and plucked the item off the table. Standing, he look at Ron and Hermione. "Coming?"

The two looked at each other, then stood.

"Wouldn't miss it, mate," Ron said, grinning widely.

As the trio made their way to the front of the room, the crowd in the Hall began to quiet down.

Climbing the dais, the three turned to face the crowd. Harry bent down and placed the item in his hand on the ground in front of him. Straightening, he looked out at the crowd and smiled.

"This year has been an interesting one. With a few exceptions, it's been the best year I've ever had at Hogwarts."

"If you ignore the fact that we had no classes," Hermione muttered.

"Like Harry said, best year ever!" Ron quipped.

"Ronald!" Molly said, standing up. Arthur yanked her back down and shushed her, surprising most of his family.

"Hush, dear. I want to hear this."

Shaking his head, Harry continued. "But to understand what you're about to see, you need to know that the beginnings of what took place here this year actually took place over the summer.

"I won't take you through all of it, as it's long, involved and a really none of your business. All you need to know is that I reached a decision over the summer.

"You see, this world can't seem to make up it's mind about me. In the press, at the Ministry, and even here at school, I was a hero, a psycho or a dangerous, dark lord in training."

The crowd began to shift uneasily, realizing the true of his words.

"Some in the Ministry, especially Fudge," he continued, glaring at the man in question, "hated me because I forced them to admit that Voldemort..." He paused as many in the Hall flinched, or cried out at the name.

He looked at Remus with a raised brow and a smirk.

Remus rolled his eyes and made a motion for him to continue.

Harry raised his voice. "I forced them to admit that Voldemort was back. In my fifth year, Fudge saw the Dark Lord himself in the halls of the Ministry. And yet he still tried to deny it."

The crowd began to mutter darkly as they stared at the Minister.

"Then we come to our dear Headmaster Dumbledore," he said, his tone mocking as he looked at the man in question. "Tell me, Albus, what rational man tempts a dark lord into a school full of innocent children, all in the hope that a mere first year student could destroy him?"

Dumbledore squirmed uncomfortably. "But Harry, the prophecy said only you could vanquish Voldemort!"

The crowd erupted, shouting questions at Dumbledore.

A high pitched whistle echoed through the Hall and all eyes returned to the front of the room.

Before Harry could speak, a cackling laugh came from the staff table.

Sybill Trelawney stood up on unsteady legs and raised her glass of cooking sherry in salute. "I think you're the only one I didn't fool with that little gem," she said, grinning at Harry.

"What?" Dumbledore asked, staring at her in horror.

She shrugged. "I was broke and had been evicted from my home. Great Aunt Cassandra taught us well. Find your mark's weakness and exploit it to gain what you need. Though I will admit, she had more luck than I've had. Many of her predictions came true. But then, she was better at reading people than I am."

She looked at Harry then, her face drawn. "I am so sorry, my dear boy, about your parents. I didn't realize that Snape was listening at the door."

"It was all fake?" Dumbledore asked, shocked. Standing, he leaned across the table, staring at her in rage. "Do you know how much time I had to spend setting up that meeting? How long it took me to convince Severus to go to Voldemort with what he'd heard? Do you understand the guilt he carried around for years, having been the cause of Lily's death? Woman, what have you done?"

"Notice," Hermione said to the crowd, "that he has sympathy for a marked Death Eater, not the child his actions orphaned? That he blames another for his own guilt?" She looked at Dumbledore. "You are an utter waste of human flesh," she spat. "You pollute the very air with every breath you take."

Many in the crowd stood and moved toward Dumbledore, shouting angrily at the man.

Not liking what she was seeing, Amelia Bones made a few quick motions with her hands. Aurors stood up throughout the hall and began forcing people back to their seats.

"You might want to move this along," Hermione told Harry quietly. "Things could get ugly in here."

"Everyone take your seats!" Ron bellowed, his voice augmented by magic. "We can lynch the old man later!"

Shaking his head at his friend's announcement, Harry raised his voice, but didn't use magic "You're right," he called, looking at Trelawney.

Those still standing stopped arguing with the aurors and quickly found their seats, not wanting to miss what the boy had to say.

As the Hall grew quiet, he nodded. "Yes, you're right. I didn't believe the prophecy. But it quickly became apparent that Voldemort did. And as Dumbledore continued to force me into confrontations with him, and with the sheep at the Ministry being unwilling to acknowledge that he was back, something had to be done.

"But I refused to allow Dumbledore to sacrifice me on the alter of prophecy. If I was going to do this, I was going to do it my way!"

He looked around the Hall and grinned. "So, with the help of Alastor Moody and Remus Lupin, Hermione, Ron and I trained over the summer. I won't go into details, as again, it's none of your business. Let's just say that we were more than prepared to do what had to be done.

"We invited you all here to see some of the results first hand. You all know about the Death Eaters. Interesting how they all died at the same time, isn't it?"

"Are you saying that was your doing, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, puzzled.

"Boy, can't slip anything by him, can we?" Ron asked, sarcastically.

He scowled. "But how?"

Harry grinned at old man. "Never underestimate the power of origami!"

Dumbledore's eyes widened as he remembered just how those Death Eaters died. "But how did you reach so many, and at the same time?"

Harry's eyes widened dramatically. "Why, magic, Albus. Magic!"

Ron began to laugh, but Hermione rolled her eyes. "You're such a child sometimes, Harry."

"Oh, come on! That was priceless!" Ron said.

"You killed them all, Potter?" Amelia asked bluntly. "But there was no evidence!"

Harry's smile was innocent and charming. "I know. You don't have to believe me. I certainly wouldn't mind if you didn't. But on the off chance that you do, keep what you just said in mind. There is no evidence. Try to prosecute me, and I'll tie the Ministry up in court for so long, we'll both be dust before it's settled."

She shook her head. "Can we just finish this, please?"

With a shrug, Harry look out at the crowd. "I don't need tell you what went on at Hogwarts this year. You all know the most important details already. We had no classes because the teachers were too busy with their drug-fueled orgies to think about the children under their care. And we, the innocent children of Hogwarts, will be forced to take this year over again."

The ex-staff members shrank back from the glares they received.

"Laying it on a bit thick, aren't you?" Hermione asked him quietly.

"Oh, please. They deserve every bit of the scorn aimed their way," Ron told her.

"True, but I feel like I'm trapped in a poorly performed and over dramatized play," she groused.

"And who was it that introduced them to the wonderful world of drug laced brownies?" Harry murmured.

"Hermione Granger, drug dealer," Ron said, staring at her. "Who'd have thought it?"

"You're just annoyed because you didn't think of it first," she told them haughtily.

The three friends grinned at each other.

"So," Harry said loudly, gaining the crowd's attention once more. "Where were we?"

"For Merlin's sake, Potter, just get on with it!" Moody shouted.

"Right, then! If I could direct your attention to the item at my feet," Harry said, drawing his wand, "you'll all find out the true reason you were invited to Hogwarts tonight."

With a flick of his wand and a quick murmured word, the small item grew in size to reveal a trunk.

"As I said earlier, my friends and I decided to solve the Wizarding world's biggest problem, though by no means it's only problem. Ladies and gentlemen, behold!"

With swirl of his wand, and a kick to the trunk for good measure, the lid popped open and the trio stepped back.

From inside a childish voice was heard quietly singing, and Voldemort slowly floated up from the trunk, only stopping once the rope around his torso went taut, keeping him tethered to the trunk.

"Wizarding Britain, I give you the Dark Torso, the most feared Dark Lord of any age, the one known as Voldemort!" Harry shouted, then bowed to the crowd.

The crowd didn't notice his little gesture, as they were too busy shrieking and running for the doors.

"You did lock them, didn't you?" Hermione asked as she observed the crowd calmly.

"Yep," Ron told her. "And just as we suspected, the sheep are too panicked to actually use their wands."

Harry sighed. "I think I feel a headache coming on. Why do they have to be so predictable?"

Casting a quick Sonorus charm on himself, Harry addressed the crowd. "I'm just curious," he said, his voice booming through the crowd loud enough to be heard over the screaming. "How many of

you noticed that the Minister, the Head of the DMLE, all but one of the aurors and every former member of the Hogwarts staff beat you all to the doors to the Great Hall?"

The crowd stilled and everyone began to look around. Sure enough, those in question were squished against the doors of the Hall, desperately trying to get them open.

From the Gryffindor table came the sound of bleating sheep. Glancing that way, Harry shook his head as the twins, ducking their mother as she tried to grab them, continued with the sound effects.

Moody stood up and shook his head. "You know, these kids are right. You all are sheep! Didn't a single one of you notice that the thing up there on the dais has no arms? No legs? No wand? What are you running for?"

Almost like something out of the cartoons that Dudley used to watch, the crowd slowly turned to face their greatest fear.

What they saw was a floating torso staring back at them, a serene smile on his face.

"Is it tea time?" he asked them in a childlike voice. "Someone will have to help me into my pink dress. One cannot have tea without dressing first."

Slowly a large pair of ears unfurled from his head and began to flap lazily as Voldemort turned to face Harry. "Will there be cake?" he asked The Boy Who Lived.

"I'll make sure that there is," Harry told him, trying hard not to stare at the elephant sized ears.

"You're such a nice young man," the Dark Lord exclaimed.

Ron shook his head. "I still think it would have been much more entertaining to do this in Diagon Alley."

"Oh! Are we going shopping, then?" Voldemort asked as he flapped his ears to face Ron.

"Er, no, not now," Ron told him. Seeing the disappointed expression on the Dark Lord's face, he waved a hand at the crowd in the hall. "But all these people came to see you."

As Voldemort slowly turned himself around to face the people in the hall, Hermione and Harry looked at Ron as though he'd grown a second head.

"What? He looked so upset at not being able to go shopping!" Ron defended himself.

"And you care about how he feels...why?" Hermione asked.

Ron squirmed. "I don't. Not really. It's just that..." he trailed off and looked at them a bit helplessly.

"He is rather pathetic, isn't he?" Harry murmured quietly.

"Exactly!" Ron exclaimed, obviously relieved that someone understood.

"What about them?" Hermione asked, gesturing toward the crowd.

"Right. Forgot about them," Harry said. Stepping forward so he stood beside the most feared man...torso...thing, in Britain, he cleared his throat. "If you people would be good enough to move away so the Ministry personnel can step forward?"

Rather than a path being cleared, the crowd turned on the officials and began shoving them to the front of the room. Once Fudge, Bones, the staff and the aurors had been forced forward, Harry bowed.

"I now turn custody of Voldemort over to you – assuming one of you is brave enough to actually step forward without being shoved," Harry told them, a brow raised in challenge.

Amelia Bones coughed, then stepped forward with her wand drawn. Then she looked at Harry. "I'm not really sure what to do with him," she said quietly.

Harry shrugged. "There's not much that needs to be done. Feed him, keep him clean and, whatever you do, don't untie the rope around

him. You don't need Voldemort bouncing off the ceiling. And he will, with great pleasure, if untethered!"

Hermione stepped forward and leaned close to Voldemort. "You've a nice crowd here. Why don't you entertain them?"

The Dark Lord's eyes widened. "May I?" he asked. At her nod, his ears clapped together three times in excitement. "How lovely! Thank you."

Clearing his throat, Voldemort took a deep breath and, in his childlike voice, began to sing.

"The sun will come out, tomorrow..."

The trio quickly left the dais and headed for the doors. The twins, grimacing at Voldemort's song, quickly followed, as did Moody and Remus.

"Well, that was fun," Harry told his friends.

"Yep," Ron said, laughing. "Best year at Hogwarts, ever!"

Prophet Article, some days later...

Hogwarts Closes! Government Falls!

Yesterday the Board of Governors for Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry officially announced it was closing its doors until next September. A Spokesperson for the Board claimed that in light of events in the last week, the Board was moving to completely replace the staff and revamp the course curriculum.

Following on the heels of this shocking announcement, the Ministry fell. The Fudge Government collapsed late last night after suffering attacks in the press, as well as from within the Wizengamot. Cornelius Fudge was arrested immediately following his resignation.

Forty two other Ministry officials and members of the Wizengamot were arrested or forced into retirement last night. Dirk Cresswell, former Head of the Goblin Liaison office, became the first muggle born wizard to assume the role of Minister of Magic.

The Goblins announced that with so many Heads of families dying in what is being called the Great Origami Purge, some families have been declared extinct, while others have been assigned a new Head based on standard Patriarchal rules. As it stands, Harry Potter is now the Head of the Parkinson, Malfoy, Nott, Rookwood and LeStrange families.

When asked what he was going to do with all the wealth, as well as the witches who had become his chattel, he announced that the former students of Hogwarts were invited to a three day long party, followed by a road trip to Disney World. As to his newly acquired chattel, he said, "They can get jobs flipping burgers, if they want to eat and have a roof over their heads. I'm not going to support them.

Oh, and Dumbledore? I know you're reading this, you pervy bastard. I told you that you should have expelled me!"

FINIS

Authors Note:

~Smiles brightly~ Something I thought I should tell you all. I finally picked a ship for this story. As it's finished, I guess there's no point in telling you my decision though, is there?

I know you're just itching to ask, so let me stop that line of thought right now.

No. I won't. Don't even bother asking, begging, bribing or otherwise trying to entice me into it. This is the end of my little crack tale. I won't continue it. Nope. Not happening. Not gonna and you can't make me!

Clear enough? Good!

Are there unresolved threads in the fic. Yep. Did I answer all your questions? Doubtful. So, as I won't be writing any more of this, and if you feel so inclined, grab something in this fic that tickled your fancy and start writing! Just let me know if you do, as I'd like to read it.

Hope you enjoyed my bit of madness. I think I'll retire back to writing a few scenes for Bob's fics and editing them - poorly I might add.

~ Bob's Note.

On a serious side, there are other stories in the works, some crack, some not. But don't expect anything soon.

Thankfully those stories will allow me to resume full control over the disclaimers.

Give us Liberty or give us Donuts!

Bye bye.